THRIVE 360 BOOTCAMP: EMPOWERING SMALL TO MID-SIZED RURAL CHURCHES TO COMBAT POVERTY

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A FINAL PROJECT SUBMITTED TO
THE DOCTORAL STUDIES COMMITTEE
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

UNITED THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
Dayton, Ohio
May 2026

United Theological Seminary
Dayton, OH

Faculty Approval Page
Doctor of Ministry Final Project

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ABSTRACT

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The context is Zion Traveler Baptist Church in Ruston, Louisiana. The problem is that the financial inequity of rural congregations and their communities increased due to the impacts of inflation, Covid-19, and the political climate that permeates the United States. If a model is developed for rural congregations to be given access to tools to create non-profit organizations, then community development can be used to alleviate poverty. The project will be conducted in a boot-camp-style training program for six weeks. Participants will have access to the tools needed to establish a non-profit organization for community development.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to my mentors, Dr. William H. Curtis and Dr. Lance Watson, whose wisdom guided and strengthened me during this project. I also honor the pastoral influence of Reverend A. G. Sudds, Sr., the late Reverend John C. Raphael, Jr., and the late Dr. E. Edward Jones, Sr., whose ministries shaped my calling and commitment to community development.

To my family, friends, classmates, and the members of the Zion Traveler Baptist Church, thank you for your constant support, prayers, and encouragement. To God be the glory!

DEDICATION

This Doctoral Ministry Project is dedicated to my wife, Tiffany, whose unwavering support, quiet strength, and love have sustained me through this demanding season of my life. Thank you for believing in me and sacrificing so much so I can pursue God's divine calling upon my life. To my children, Reece and Mariah, you are my joy and my inspiration. Everything I do, I do it with you in my heart.

INTRODUCTION

The central theme of this Doctor of Ministry project is "Thrive 360 Bootcamp: Empowering Nonprofits to Combat Poverty." The principle of being a good soldier permeates the pages of Scripture: "Join with me in suffering, like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No one serving as a soldier gets entangled in civilian affairs but rather tries to please his commanding officer" (2 Tim. 2:3-4). "Praise be to the Lord my Rock, who trains my hands for war, my fingers for battle" (Ps. 144:1). The only way for a soldier to adequately prepare for battle is through basic training or bootcamp. This bootcamp aims to provide churches with the opportunity to become aware of the tools needed to develop nonprofits dedicated to combating poverty. The foundations of this intensive Doctor of Ministry project in the ministry context were rooted in a solid biblical, historical, theological, and interdisciplinary framework.

Many churches in the ministry context continue to suffer because of the devastating effects of COVID-19. Inflation and the political climate have also presented many financial challenges for congregations. Awareness of different methods of ministry and avenues to tap into various streams of income via non-profits and partnerships enables churches to combat poverty in their context.

The biblical foundation for the "Thrive 360 Bootcamp: Empowering Non-profits to Combat Poverty" is rooted in the scripture found in Isaiah 58:12, which is Chapter Two. The prophet Isaiah states, "Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise

up the age-old foundations; you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings" (Is. 58:12). The context of Isaiah 58:12 is the return of the exiles from Babylonian captivity. When the exiles returned from Babylon, they found their communities in complete ruin. The devastation the exiles encountered mirrors the plight faced in the rural community where the project unfolds. Isaiah challenges these believers to move beyond their spiritual apathy and begin rebuilding their community for the glory of God. The exiles are identified as Repairers of Broken Walls and Restorers of Streets.

If the returning exiles are to be Repairers of Broken Walls and Restorers of Streets, they must partner with King Cyrus, King Darius, and King Artaxerxes of Persia. The "Thrive 360 Bootcamp: Empowering Non-profits to Combat Poverty" informed churches about the benefits they gain from partnerships among non-profits, public, and private entities. They learned about the resources available through community banks, colleges and universities, city and parish governments, grants, and federal appropriations.

The historical foundation, Chapter Three, for the Doctor of Ministry project lies in the social Gospel movement. "The early social Gospel movement emerged during the rapidly industrializing American society following the Civil War. Recognizing the injustices of 'triumphant capitalism,' some progressive ministers prescribed a large dose of 'practical Christianity' to address these wrongs and meet the social needs of the era."[1] Just as the social Gospel movement arose from the American Civil War, the "Thrive 360 Bootcamp: Empowering Non-profits to Combat Poverty" was born out of COVID-19. It was the church that took the lead in helping communities overcome the challenges of

[1] Charles Howard Hopkins, *The Rise of the Social Gospel in American Protestantism, 1865-1915* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1940), 121.

capitalism after the Civil War, and it is the church that must take the lead in helping communities overcome the devastating effects of COVID-19 on their lives.

The social Gospel movement encompasses practical Christianity and a practical theology. It is a movement that goes beyond systematic theology and biblical theology by emphasizing that the church's religion should be real and practical. The timeless truth of "loving your neighbor as yourself" encapsulates the social Gospel movement. The social Gospel brings the biblical foundation of Isaiah 58:12 to life through the Doctor of Ministry project. To be Repairers of the Ruins and Restorers of the Streets, one must have a historical foundation in the social Gospel. One must be willing to embrace the teachings of Jesus and minister to the least of these. "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me" (Matt. 25:35-36). When congregations become aware of the tools to create non-profits, they can, through the social Gospel movement, combat poverty and serve the least of these.

The theological foundation for the "Thrive 360 Bootcamp: Empowering Nonprofits to Combat Poverty" is liberation theology, Chapter Four.

> Liberation theology has its origins in Latin America in the mid-1950s as socioeconomic development pushed the peasant workers and farming peasant workers and farming populations into desperate poverty. With economic unrest came political unrest, and military dictators took over many governments in the name of national security. While these social and political transformations were taking place, the church was also moving toward a more socially oriented mission. Laypeople, religious, and charismatic members of the hierarchy committed themselves to working with the poor.[2]

[2] Kira Dault, "What is Liberation Theology: The Poor Not Only Should be Cared For, but Also Brought into the Fullness of Human Flourishing," *U.S. Catholic* 79, no. 10 (October 2014): 46.

Liberation theology enables the church today to take the lead when it concerns combating poverty.

There are those who would label liberation theology as a form of heretical theology, but there is nothing heretical about it; in fact, it is a theology that Jesus embraced at the beginning of His earthly ministry. Jesus declared, “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because He has anointed me to proclaim freedom for prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Lk. 4:18-19). Jesus highlights that liberation theology uplifts humanity and the community both socially and spiritually. The “Thrive 360 Boot Camp” empowered churches to uplift their communities socially, spiritually, and economically.

The interdisciplinary foundation, Chapter Five, for the “Thrive 360 Bootcamp: Empowering Non-profits to Combat Poverty” is drawn from the banking sector. There is a clear connection between the community orientation of churches and that of Banks. Community banks distinguish themselves from regional, national, and commercial banks by their deep investment in the communities they serve. During and after the COVID-19 pandemic, community banks took the initiative to assist their neighborhoods in recovering from the economic impact of the virus. The bootcamp aims to empower local churches to lead efforts and collaborate with local banks to reinvest in their communities. Community banks, through Community Reinvestment Money, are tasked with fulfilling the biblical foundation of Isaiah 58:12 as Repairers of Ruins and Restorers of the Streets. The historical foundation of the social Gospel movement reflects the fire, passion, and love that community banks have for their neighborhoods. Liberation theology is the driving force that compels banks to work diligently and partner with local

churches to liberate individuals from the systemic chains and cycles of poverty. “Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law” (Rom. 13:8).

CHAPTER ONE

MINISTRY FOCUS

Introduction

It was in the year of Lord 2006 that I was installed as the pastor of the Zion Traveler Baptist Church located in Ruston, Louisiana. Being permitted to serve this body of believers for the past seventeen years has been an act of God's divine grace. The Apostle Paul speaks of this divine grace which was also bestowed upon him, "Of this Gospel, I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of his power."[1] The unmerited favor of God has afforded me the opportunity to ride the roller coaster of ministry, embracing the ups and downs as well as the mountains and the valleys. One of the valleys during my tenure has been the overwhelming financial challenges faced by the church as well as the community. The church has navigated financial storms brought about by recession, a worldwide pandemic, and inflation while ministering to a community that is an economic and financial desert. Like the disciples who were with Jesus when He performed the miracle of the loaves, we have placed our little in the hands of Jesus, and it has become much. We have earnestly and fervently prayed, claiming the promise of that great doxological hymn found in Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus. "Now to him who is able to do

[1] Biblical citations are from the English Standard Version of the Bible, unless otherwise noted, Ephesians 3:7.

immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us" (Eph. 3:20, NIV).

According to the ALICE Report created by the United Way, people are employed in Lincoln Parish, but they are struggling to make ends meet. ALICE is an acronym for Asset Limited Income Constrained households that earn more than the Federal Poverty Level, but less than the basic cost of living for the parish.[2] People are working, but they are barely making ends meet. Costs for basic household needs continue to increase while salaries and wages have plateaued and declined. My journey in life and ministry has prepared me to be on the frontlines in ministry to attack the problem of poverty wholistically in my ministry context. Throughout this chapter, my purpose is to prove how merging my life journey and ministry context equipped me to become what the Prophet Isaiah describes as "a repairer of the breach." Isaiah declares, "And your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to dwell in" (Is. 58:12).

Context

In 1891, the Zion Traveler Baptist Church was founded by seven dedicated Godfearing men and women: Brother George Lewis, Sr., Brother George Lewis, Jr., Brother Charles Lewis, Sister Salina Lewis, Sister Nacy Moron, Reverend Andrew Moton, and Sister Melvina Lewis. The church was formed out of a split, but it is more united than ever to serve this present age and the community in which she sits. One of the prominent families in the Zion Traveler Baptist Church since its conception has been the

[2] Stephanie Hoopes, "Covid and Financial Hardship in Louisiana," United for ALICE, http://www.UnitedForALICE.org.

Lewis Family. At one time in the church's history, because of the Lewis' genetic and biological footprint upon the congregation, it was known as "The Lewis Church." The church, in 132 years, has grown beyond the Lewis family and the first building, which was a one-room frame structure. The church is now the largest black church in north central Louisiana.

The campus now has a 17,000 square foot sanctuary and a 23,000 square foot Family Life Center. The people of Zion, despite financial hardships and socioeconomic background, have done great things for the glory of God. The church is a group of people who know how to place their little in the hand of Jesus and watch it become much. I believe such faith and tenacity are what drive the membership to serve the impoverished community that surrounds the church.

Zion Traveler sits in the southeastern corner of Ruston, Louisiana, in Lincoln Parish. The south side of Ruston is a predominantly African American community. Even though the south side of Ruston is predominantly African American, statistically, there seems to be a balance between the percentage of blacks and whites in Lincoln Parish and Ruston. In Lincoln Parish, whites make up 56.2% of the population, and blacks account for 40.3% of the population.[3] Whites only outnumber blacks by 16% throughout the parish. The numbers are more even within the city limits of Ruston. In the city of Ruston, the racial lines break down to 49% whites and 42.1% blacks.[4] Statistically, whites only outnumber blacks by 7%. There is indeed a racial divide in Ruston, with most whites

[3] United States Census Bureau, "Quick Facts: Lincoln Parish, Louisiana," U. S. Census Bureau, https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/linconparishlouisiana.

[4] United States Census Bureau, "Quick Facts: Ruston city, Louisiana," U. S. Census Bureau, http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/rustoncitylouisiana.

living north of the interstate and blacks living south of the interstate. However, there is a greater disparity and divide as it concerns wealth. Statistics reveal that out of 6,745 black households and 9,739 white households in Lincoln Parish, 27% of blacks are in poverty compared to 13% of whites, while 53% of blacks are ALICE compared to 39% of whites, and only 20% of blacks are above the ALICE threshold compared to 48% of whites.[5]

Such financial disparity between whites and blacks explains why Zion Traveler sits between two housing developments. The Old Projects sit to the west of the church campus, and the New Projects sit to the south. These two housing developments and the community surrounding the church serve as an open door for the body of Christ to meet the needs of the people. It is the Jerusalem we must minister to before moving on to the uttermost parts of the world. Jesus put it this way to the Apostles, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

By ministering to our Jerusalem, we fulfill our motto, which is "Creating a Caring Community." We minister to our Jerusalem in several ways. We are intentional about practicing the biblical principles of Acts 2:42-47, which include Christian education, fellowship, worship, mission and evangelism, and economic development. Simply put, we are advancing the kingdom's agenda through our worship, work, witness, and the word of God.

Providing an atmosphere that is conducive to the study of God's divinely inspired word is at the core of what we do to fulfill one of the principles found in Acts 2:42-47.

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[5] ALICE Report, "Covid and Financial Hardship in Louisiana," United For ALICE, http://www.UnitedForALICE.org.

Luke, the author of Acts, writes, “And they devoted themselves to the Apostles’ teaching” (Acts 2:42). Like the early church, Zion Traveler is devoted to Christian Education. The people who live in the community that surrounds Zion Traveler can easily walk to the church to participate in Sunday School on Sundays at 8:30 a.m., Morning Worship on Sundays at 9:30 a.m., and Bible Study on Wednesday nights. Youth Bible Study is held at 5:30 p.m. in the Family Life Center, while Adult and College Bible Study is held in the fellowship hall and sanctuary at 6:30 p.m. The church’s eighteen classrooms provide a space and place for believers to grow in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. The church’s transportation ministry is available to drive youth and college students to worship and Bible study, as well as other ministry opportunities offered by the church.

Throughout the year, we hold weekend conferences on various spiritual disciplines. The two most recent conferences focused on Christian stewardship and prayer. Pastors and laypeople who specialize in these areas teach the membership on Friday nights and Saturday mornings. In these conferences, we strive to “grow in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 3:18). We also participate in denominational work and national conferences as a local church to better serve the community. Educational opportunities are provided by way of the Liberty Hill Baptist Association, the Louisiana Missionary Baptist State Convention, and the National Baptist Convention, USA Incorporated. The most helpful educational tools have been acquired by attending the IC3 Church Growth and Development Conference and E. K. Bailey Expository Preaching Conference.

We not only model the early church by way of Christian education, but we also model the early church by way of fellowship. “And they devoted themselves to the Apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42). If Christian education is the foundation, then fellowship is the glue that helps us stick together as a body of believers. I believe one of the most challenging aspects of going through Covid-19 was not being able to fellowship with the members of the church in person. However, many of the fellowship opportunities that were practiced before the pandemic have now been reinstituted, and new opportunities have been created. Since the pandemic, we are once again having our church anniversary tailgate in the parking lot of the church after the anniversary worship service. Football is a major in this part of the world because the two major universities in the area are Louisiana Tech University and Grambling State University. The church is also split down the middle between New Orleans Saints and Dallas Cowboys fans. In the future, hopefully, the love of sports will be a stimulus for our small groups that have been so difficult to get off the ground.

Due to the racial divide in our city, we must be intentional about fellowshipping with Christians of other races, especially white evangelical Christians. Paul and John state clearly in their writings that God intends for the body of Christ to be one. Paul says in his letter to the church at Ephesus:

> But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in the ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility (Eph. 2:13-16).

The blood and cross of Christ unify the body of Christ despite the pigmentation of one's skin. John emphasizes this great truth in the book of Revelation when he declares, "After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying with a loud voice, 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!'" (Rev. 7:9-10). Therefore, we have an Annual Christmas fellowship with our sister white church, which is the Temple Baptist Church. It provides us an opportunity to fellowship by crossing racial lines and tearing down racial barriers as we create a caring community and repair the breach. "There is one body and one Spirit just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (Eph. 4:4-6).

The demographics of Ruston and Lincoln Parish inform the style of worship that we have adopted at Zion Traveler. Analysis of Lincoln Parish and Ruston's demographics reveals that the community is between the ages of eighteen and sixty-five. In Lincoln Parish, 5.3% of people are under five years old, 19.5% are under eighteen years old, and 14.5% are over the age of sixty-five years old.[6] The numbers reflect the same demographic concerning age in the city of Ruston. In the city of Ruston, 5.2% are under the age of five years old, 16.6% are under eighteen years old, and 11.1% are over sixty-five years old.[7] Like the believers in the early church, we gather "praising God and

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[6] United States Census Bureau, "Quick Facts: Lincoln Parish, Louisiana," U.S. Census Bureau, https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/linconparishlouisiana.

[7] United States Census Bureau, "Quick Facts: Ruston city, Louisiana," U.S. Census Bureau, http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/rustoncitylouisiana.

having favor with the people" (Acts 2:47). When we gather to praise God, we are intentional about maintaining balance in worship. At Zion Traveler, you can receive traditional worship and contemporary worship in one service. In one moment, the choir can be singing a contemporary selection such as "Every Praise" and in the next moment, be singing an old hymn of the church, "In the Cross." Both old and young are drawn to the expository preaching that has been a practice of the pastors of Zion Traveler for decades.

Mission and evangelism are also key components to creating a caring community as we repair the breach. Both components are seen in Luke's description of the beautiful first-century church at its birth. Luke writes, "And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all" (Acts 2:47). What a beautiful portrait of missions! Luke also speaks of the fruit of their evangelistic efforts when he says, "And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47). Through our missions and evangelism, we sow seeds that will eventually be reaped by God, adding to Zion Traveler as would be saved. On every third Saturday of the month, we partner with the Food Bank of Northeast Louisiana to distribute food to the community. Once a month, both our Men's and Women's ministries share the Gospel at the Lincoln Parish Detention Center. We also aid the Third Judicial District's Drug Court in its Recovery Program. We have implemented Sunday School in the park, Forty Days of Community Prayer, and the members of Zion Traveler are always knocking on doors and engaging in personal evangelism. Like many other churches, we face the challenge of getting all members to become disciples and share their faith with sinners. Jesus put it

this way, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore, pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest” (Mt. 9:37-38).

I believe Acts 2:42-47 provides another avenue for the church to create a caring community and repair the breach. It becomes obvious and jumps off the pages of scripture that the early church had a philanthropic spirit. They used the resources made available to them to lift others out of poverty. Act 2:45 does not just speak to their passion for missions but it also speaks to their passion for dealing with the issue of poverty wholistically. They sold their possessions and used the money that they received to help those whose socio-economic condition was deplorable. As we create a caring community and repair the breach, we do it through a vehicle called the Zion Traveler Community Development Corporation. Currently, we are partnering with City of Ruston, Grambling State University, Louisiana Tech University, Origen Bank, Century Next Bank, and Gibsland Bank and Trust to construct a $2.7 million housing development called Greenwood Crossing. We also offer a Financial Literacy Program that assists families in creating a financial action plan, developing spending plans, learning money management, and alleviating systematic poverty. God has opened a door for us to invest in the people of our community by way of a $515,000 grant that we have received from the Department of Health and Human Services.

Ministry Journey

Every year, millions of people travel to the city of New Orleans to celebrate Mardi Gras. One of the highlights of Mardi Gras are the parades that roll down the streets during carnival season. Oh, the excitement of young and old as they chant “throw me something

Mr. throw me something Mr." as the parade rolls down the street. When attending a Mardi Gras parade, one must stand on the ground and wait for the parade to pass by float by float. However, if you have ever gone to a parade in New Orleans, I am pretty sure you noticed the helicopters flying above in the sky. On the ground, one views the parade float by float, but up in the air, one can see the parade from start to finish. We only see life in the present tense, float by float. However, God sees life from the beginning to the end. The Prophet Isaiah writes that the Lord says, "Remembering the former things of old; for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand and I will accomplish all my purpose'" (Is. 46:9-10). As I examine my ministry journey, I believe God has used three different men in three different phases of my ministry to accomplish his purpose for my life thus far. The three men were my pastors, Reverend A. G. Sudds Sr., the late Reverend John C. Rapheal, Jr., and the late Dr. E. Edward Jones, Sr.

My ministry journey began at the age of ten years old. I accepted Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior at the age of eight years old, but I accepted my call to preach the good news of Jesus Christ at the age of ten. My childhood pastor, Reverend A. G. Sudds, Sr., was also my mom's first cousin. Pastor Sudds influenced my life in a tremendous way. I spent numerous hours with Pastor Sudds as he migrated around Shreveport, preaching afternoon services and revivals. One day, I felt the Spirit of God moving upon my heart to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It was a burden that I could not shake. After hours of counseling with my pastor and wrestling within my own spirit, on Easter

Sunday of 1991, I confessed that God had called me to preach. I stood on the truth that God spoke to Jeremiah, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born, I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations” (Jer. 1:5).

Being a boy preacher came with ups and downs. Preparing and preaching sermons was easy because that is what God had called me to do; however, it was not as easy as a young boy living the sermons that I prepared and preached. Have you ever been streaming a movie, and the internet connection was bad? The bad connection can cause the audio and video of the movie not to be in concord or agreement. There were times in my life as a boy preacher when my audio did not line up with my video. But I thank God for Pastor Sudds, who mentored and nurtured me when I was a neophyte in ministry. He mentored me just as Paul mentored his son in the ministry, Timothy. Paul said to Timothy concerning pastoral ministry, “He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil” (1 Tm. 3:6).
Pastor Sudds helped to sculpture and mold my life by knocking the rough edges off so when it was time for me to serve in ministry I would be prepared.

My life was shaped significantly by being active in local, state, and national denominational work. I developed a love for the Word of God by participating in activities such as Memory Work, Bible Sword Drill, and Drill Team. Many of the scriptures that I quote in sermons today are those that I learned by way of Bible Activities. My late mother made me write every scripture that I was to learn at least fifty times. I thank God for a mother who believed in discipline! I thank God for a pastor who would not allow me to quit! When I tried to quit Bible activities to concentrate on high school sports, Pastor Sudds put me back on the right path.

Watching Pastor Sudds preach week after week caused me to develop a love for expository preaching. Pastor Sudds preaching and teaching also introduced me to great doctrines of the church, such as justification, sanctification, regeneration, and salvation. God, through my parents, Sunday School teachers, youth supervisors, and pastor, was preparing me for future ministry. I would not be the person and preacher I am today without great people investing in my life spiritually at an early age.

In the fall of 1998, I arrived on the campus of Dillard University in the city of New Orleans, Louisiana. It was at Dillard University where I met the love of my life and future wife, Tiffany Dianna Owens, from a little town south of Jackson, Mississippi named Terry. Not only did I meet my wife at Dillard University, but God was also shaping and accomplishing His will in my life. I attended church at the New Hope Baptist Church, where the pastor was the late Reverend John C. Raphael. My childhood pastor, Reverend A. G. Sudds, taught me about the importance of expository preaching and doctrine; however, it was Pastor Raphael who taught me about missions and evangelism. It was on the streets of New Orleans where I learned how to be a street preacher. Every Saturday morning, Pastor Raphael would lead us out on the streets of New Orleans to fulfill the Great Commission. I also got an opportunity to assist Pastor Raphael with Foreign Mission projects because he was the Executive Secretary of the National Baptist Convention of America Foreign Mission Board. The Great Commission drove Pastor Raphael's passion for mission and evangelism. He wanted to win souls to Christ both at home and abroad.

My journey in ministry has also been shaped by the late Dr. E. Edward Jones, who pastored the Galilee Baptist Church of Shreveport, Louisiana. It was August 2005, and

my last semester of seminary was about to commence. I was now married to the love of my life Tiffany Diana Owens White. We got married the previous year, on July 24, 2004, in her hometown of Terry Mississippi. It was in August 2005 that Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast and the city of New Orleans. Tiffany and I evacuated to my hometown, Shreveport. It was at this time that I became a staff member at the Galilee Baptist Church. My childhood pastor, Reverend A. G. Sudds taught me about expository preaching and doctrine. My college pastor, Reverend John C. Raphael taught me the importance of missions and evangelism. It was Dr. E. Edward Jones who taught me about dealing with people and church administration.

It was in the fall of 2006 that I became the pastor of the Zion Traveler Baptist Church in Ruston, Louisiana. For the past seventeen years, I have been the pastor of Zion Traveler. There have been many ups and downs along the way. When I arrived in 2006, Zion Traveler was a church that was hurting. God has a sense of humor, placing a young pastor who never pastored before at a church that needed healing and restoration. Dr. E. Edward Jones, who was my pastor and installed me at Zion Traveler, instructed me to love the people and focus on ministry. One of the hardest things to do in ministry is to love people who sometimes do not reciprocate the love shown to them. I had to practice the same principle that Paul challenged the Christians in Ephesus to exemplify. Paul challenged those believers with these words, “With all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love” (Eph. 4:2).

Loving God’s people motivated me to lead our church in holistically addressing the issue of poverty in the community. Relationships have been the key to our success as a church doing community ministry. Those relationships opened doors for us to do

missions, education, and evangelism. We have strengthened and impacted the community for the glory of God.

Synergy

I believe that God has been orchestrating my life in such a way that all things have been working together for my good. Paul was correct when he wrote to the church in Rome, "And we know that for those who love God, all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose" (Rom. 8:28). God can take the good, the bad, and the ugly and use it for His glory. I believe that is what we call synergy.

God has been preparing me for the obstacles and challenges I will face as the Zion Traveler Baptist Church pastor. He divinely orchestrated my journey in life and ministry to equip me to be a repairer of the breach. The greatest breach in the African American community of Ruston is financial inequity. The great divide between the rich and poor grows day by day, week by week, and year by year. I can relate to the financial inequity that plagues the black community where I serve because I experienced it as a child. We lived paycheck to paycheck! We often had to rob Peter to pay Paul! My family had lots of love but very little money. We were poor financially but rich spiritually. Both of my parents were hard-working people in financial difficulties who relied on their faith in God. Like Abraham, they learned that God always has a ram in the bush in our times of need. "And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So, Abraham called the name of that place, 'The

LORD will provide,' as it is said to this day, 'On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided'" (Gn. 22:13-14).

Like my parents, the people of Zion Traveler, since the church's early days, have been resilient people who overcome financial difficulties by way of their faith. By taking their little and placing it in the hands of God, it has become much. The campus of Zion Traveler sits in a predominately black and poor community. Yet, the campus of Zion Traveler has a 17,000-square-foot sanctuary and a 23,000-square-foot Family Life Center. On Zion Traveler's campus, there are eighteen classrooms, eight restrooms, five offices, two full-service kitchens, a gymnasium, a fellowship hall, a computer lab, a library, and a baptistry. This can only be done when poor people practice God's principles of giving that are found in the Word of God. Those who live by faith systematically, sacrificially, and spontaneously despite their own poverty can do marvelous and magnificent things for the kingdom of God. Zion Traveler is not a wealthy church, but even now, we are able to take the little that God has blessed us with, put it in His hands, and watch it become much.

Recovering and rebounding after Hurricane Katrina has also prepared me to serve God's people. No longer would I depend solely on the testimony and experiences of my parents; I was able to witness what God can do for myself. The words of the Psalmist became a reality during this season of my life: "God is our refuge and strength, an ever present help in trouble" (Ps. 46:1). "The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit. The righteous person may have many troubles, but the LORD delivers him from them all" (Ps. 34:18-19). During this time, God equipped me with the skills to help our church navigate difficult financial hardships. We have faced

recessions, inflation, and a worldwide pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic truly matured and developed me as a pastor. The community, church, and I grieved as a pastor because of the loss of so many. Yet amid all the grief, God still worked everything together for our good. The church grew both numerically and financially. In a sense, COVID-19 became our pharaoh. Moses explains it best in the book of Exodus: "But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and the more they spread abroad" (Ex. 1:12). The worse the pandemic became, the more the Lord added to the church. God used the pandemic to help us refocus and retool various aspects at Zion Traveler. People from all over the world are now connected to the church because of streaming and social media. The pandemic also pushed us to conduct ministry in new ways. During this time, as people in the community faced financial struggles, we implemented "Faith and Finances" classes. The ability to be fluid, flexible, and fast- skills I learned after Hurricane Katrina- was a gift from God, allowing me to adapt during and after the pandemic.

In 2005, my wife was pregnant, and we were officially Hurricane Katrina evacuees. Dr. E. Edward Jones was indeed a blessing to my family. Even then, God was preparing me for future ministry. Dr. Jones placed much emphasis on the church serving the community holistically. He created several non-profits, such as Galilee Majestic Arms, Galilee Eden Gardens, Galilee City, and Galilee Economic Development Corporation. Watching and learning hands-on how non-profits provide another avenue for the local church to do ministry holistically inspired me to develop the Zion Traveler Community Development Corporation. I believe a church that sits in an impoverished community should be a blessing to that community.

There is example after example in the writings of Paul how the local churches impacted the communities in which they were located. First, the churches serve their communities by preaching and sharing the Gospel. This is evident by Paul and Silas traveling to places like Philippi and Thessalonica. Paul answers the Macedonian call in Acts chapter sixteen and has an immediate impact on the city of Philippi. The impact is manifested by way of the conversion of a seller of purple named Lydia and the casting out of a demon-possessed slave girl. "One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. She was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message" (Acts 16:14). Acts 16:18 says concerning the demon-possessed slave girl, "She kept this up for many days. Finally, Paul became so annoyed that he turned around and said to the spirit, 'In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!' At that moment the spirit left her." In Acts chapter seventeen, the impact of the church is seen by the statement made concerning Paul and Silas arriving in Thessalonica. "These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here" (Acts 17:6). When the church is active in its local community, there should be some good trouble transpiring that transforms the looked over, left out, left behind, and least of these.

The blessings of Jesus Christ are not just eschatological, but they are for the here and now. Black people do not and should not have to wait until they get to heaven to experience the riches of God. This truth is supported by the Word of God. This truth is highlighted in many of Paul's writings to the early church. "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty you might become rich" (2 Cor. 8:9). Jesus was homeless, hungry, and

hurt so we could enjoy His riches here on earth also. Therefore, the church has a responsibility to lift homeless, hungry, and hurting people out of their plight because of the sacrifice of Jesus. He sacrificed so we could have success. Paul wrote these words to his son in the ministry, Timothy, "For while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come" (1 Tim. 4:8). One can see the fruit of living a godly life and practicing godly financial principles even in this life. This principle is also seen in the writings of John to the church at large. God desires to bless His people wholistically on earth before they fold up their tent and enter the new heaven and new earth. "Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well" (3 Jn. 2). Therefore, the Zion Traveler Community Development Corporation exists to offer financial literacy programs that assist families in creating a financial plan, developing spending plans, learning money management, and alleviating systematic poverty.

Serving under Dr. E. Edward Jones has also driven my passion to provide affordable housing for those who are from a low socioeconomic background. Currently, a thriving partnership exists called "Real Change in Ruston," which is a partnership between Zion Traveler Community Development Corporation, the city of Ruston, Louisiana Tech University, Grambling State University, Origen Bank, Century Next Bank, and Gibsland Bank and Trust to build a $2.7 million housing development known as Greenwood Crossing. Forty homes will be built and sold to first-time home buyers. Why? Homeownership is one of the keys to lifting those out of poverty.

Education is also a key component to lifting the community out of poverty. Currently, the church has entered a partnership with Innovative Network of Knowledge to open an Early Head Start program at the church. The program will be catered toward the young children beginning at the age of two years old who live in the housing developments adjacent to the church. The program will begin to help young children prepare to enter preschool and kindergarten on the proper reading level. In order to save the community, the church, along with its partners, is implementing the strategy of Soloman at an early age. “Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it” (Prv. 22:6).

God has been preparing me to repair the breach in the black community on the southeast end of Ruston, Louisiana, step by step and day by day. I believe that synergy is ordained and orchestrated by God. Therefore, what God has put together, let no man put asunder. We will continue as a body of believers to fulfill our God-given responsibility to repair the breach. The Zion Traveler Baptist Church and Zion Traveler Community Development Corporation has been placed in this community for the glory of God. Therefore, we cannot neglect our God-given responsibility. “For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father’s family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this” (Est. 4:14). We cannot remain silent, and we will not remain silent as our community suffers. Knowing that we have been placed for such a time as this, the Zion Traveler Baptist Church and I, through our non-profit, the Zion Traveler Community Development Corporation, will continue to be change agents and allow our lights to shine bright for Jesus.

CHAPTER TWO

BIBLICAL FOUNDATION

Introduction

The economic plight of rural congregations and their communities has increased drastically due to the impacts of inflation, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the hostile political climate that permeates the United States of America. Economists believe that the escalating rate of inflation is in many ways directly connected to the Covid-19 pandemic. In a hearing before the Committee on Small Business in the United States Congress, economists said, "The COVID-19 Pandemic started this inflationary cycle that we are still experiencing, but we have seen it prolonged by reckless levels of government spending."[1] Not only have small businesses gotten caught up in a cycle of inflation that plagues the nation because of COVID-19, but the effects can also be felt in small towns and communities across America. The final hardship felt in businesses will eventually be felt in the community, and it will also be felt in the church. Churches of all sizes, ethnicities, demographics, denominational backgrounds, and geographic locations face financial instability.

[1] United States, "Prices on the Rise: Examining of Inflation on Small Businesses: Hearing before the Committee on Small Business, United States House of Representatives, One Hundred Eighteenth Congress, First Session, June 7, 2023" (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office, 2023), 1, https://purl.fdlp.gov/GPO/gpo215800.

Conservatives typically frown upon reckless government spending, but government spending is usually what enables impoverished communities to rise out of the abyss of economic plight. As a matter of fact, government spending is what has caused the United States to recover from Covid-19. Those experts testifying on Capitol Hill allude to this fact: "Yet our recovery from the pandemic has been unparalleled.

Fiscal stimulus, like the Cares Act and the American Rescue Plan, turned the deepest post-World War II recession into the shortest."[2] Despite government spending to provide relief and recovery from the pandemic, many rural congregations are still suffering. Many were not able to access resources such as the Cares Act and the American Rescue Plan because they were denied by national banks in our community, such as J. P. Morgan Chase and Regions. However, those with relationships with local banks such as Origin Bank and Century Next Bank were able to benefit from the federal assistance. There are also churches that do not have non-profit organizations, which provide more opportunities for them to leverage relationships with banking partners and other community partners. There is a breach. There is a large, wide hole that leaves rural congregations and communities at a disadvantage when navigating the turbulent, tempestuous waters of inflation, post-Covid-19, and a toxic political culture.

The prophetic voice of Isaiah in Isaiah 58:12 reminds us that, despite a community's deplorable conditions, God always provides for Himself a remnant that He empowers to rebuild, rise, repair, and restore what lies in ruins. Isaiah declares, "Your

[2] United States, "Prices on the Rise," 2.

people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age-old foundations; you will be called the Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings" (Is. 58:12).[3]

Background and Literary Context of Isaiah

The Book of Isaiah falls within the literary genre of sacred scripture known as prophecy. The prophetic voices of the Old Testament were both foretellers and forthtellers. Isaiah foretells the future in this literary work of prophecy as he prophesies hundreds of years in advance concerning the birth, sacrificial death, and resurrection of the Suffering Servant, the Lord Jesus Christ. However, the prophetic voice of Isaiah is not subjugated to the future, but he also proclaims by preaching to God's people about real issues plaguing their Jewish communities. This truth is highlighted in the pericope of Isaiah 58:12. The prophet speaks to the community's current plight when he declares, "Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age-old foundations; you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings" (Is. 58:13). A careful reading of Isaiah chapter fifty-eight reveals that the spiritual condition of the people was indeed the source of the community's economic and social blight. The repetition of words such as fast and fasting throughout the chapter identifies the spiritual discipline of fasting as the issue of the day.

Gilberto Lozano suggests "The people alleged that they practice the proper ritual behavior (fasting), but YHWH responded that their fasting was disapproved (58:1-5),

[3] Biblical citations are from the New International Version unless otherwise stated, Isaiah 58:12.

which then led to a presentation of the fasting that receives divine approval (58:6-14)."[4] A close reading of Isaiah chapter fifty-eight reveals that their fasting was disapproved by God because it made the conditions of the community worse, not better. Instead of fasting to please God, they fasted to please themselves. "Yet on the day of fasting, you do as you please and exploit your workers" (Is. 58:3b). Isaiah vividly explains how things got worse after the fast, "Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high" (Is. 58:4). Lozano is correct that this is a serious accusation against the people that had also been made by other prophets. Lozano says, "This is a serious accusation, but not completely unexpected. That prophet (Amos) had similarly denounced the religious practices of the Israelite elites, which had all the trappings of proper religion but were nevertheless devoid of significance because of the injustices practiced by those elites against the poor (Amos 2:6-8, 4:4-5; 5:11-12)."[5] The truth that was reached during the prophetic era of Amos had not saturated the hearts and minds of the people even after the Babylonian captivity. They had not grasped that there is no disconnect between the righteousness and justice of God. The righteousness and justice of God are like hamburgers and french-fries, milk and cereal, and greens and cornbread. Justice is often paired with "tsedeqa" standardly translated as righteousness; 'justice and righteousness."[6]

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[4] Gilberto Lozano, "NBBC, Isaiah 40-66," In *A Commentary in Wesleyan Tradition* (Kansas City, MO: The Foundry Publishing, 2020), 175, ProQuest Ebook Central.

[5] Lozano, "Isaiah 40-66," 174w.

[6] Nicolas Wolterstorff, "Justice in the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible: In Justice Rights and Wrongs," *Princeton University Press* (2008): 69, https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt7sgfp.7.

They had forgotten what God requires of His people according to Micah 6:8, which says, “He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” The church’s spiritual amnesia concerning the connection between God’s righteousness and justice leads to communities that suffer socially and economically. The repair of the community’s spiritual condition would ultimately lead to the repair of the community’s economic and social condition. Therefore, Isaiah 58:12 serves as a bridge between the condemnation of the sins of the past and the redemptive, glorious future of the community’s spiritual, social, and economic conditions. God’s people, as they rebuild the ruins of their community, would indeed foreshadow the coming Suffering Servant in the person of Jesus Christ, the true Repairer of the Breach. Jesus would one day read the prophetic words of Isaiah in the local synagogue, “The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners” (Is. 61:1).

Historical Context

The writers of two critical commentaries place Isaiah 58:12 in the historical context of the Jewish post-Babylonian captivity. Joseph Blenkinsopp dates it during the time of Nehemiah, who had the daunting divine duty of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. According to Blenkinsopp, “The miserable social conditions that Nehemiah claims to have rectified (Neh. 5:1-13) led some commentators to read Isaiah verses threeb-four as

an addendum from that time (mid-fifth century B.C.E.)."[7] It is also believed that the prophecy of Isaiah in Isaiah chapter fifty-eight aligns historically with Zechariah chapters seven through eight. John D. Watts states, "The chapter parallels 7-8 in theme and context, but this scene is set later. A temple of sorts has been established in Jerusalem."[8] Both Nehemiah and Zechariah provide the foundation to come to a post-Babylonian captivity historical context for Isaiah 58:12.

Therefore, the historical context supports the argument that the spiritual condition of the people was linked to the community's condition. The repairing of the breach and the restoring of the walls had to be stimulated by the rebuilding of the temple. First, Ezra rebuilds the temple to restore the people spiritually, and then Nehemiah rebuilds the walls of Jerusalem to restore the people socially. Once the people restored their relationship with God, the door was then opened for the divine and dynamic restoration of the community.

Social Context

Isaiah 58:12 falls into a gloomy, dark, and depraved social context. The Jewish community has been emancipated from Babylonian captivity but spiritually, economically, and socially they are still in bondage. They are indeed the opposite of Lazarus in the Gospel of John. Lazarus was raised from the dead by Jesus Christ, but he also was liberated from his grave garments. John the beloved writes, "The dead man

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[7] Joseph Blenkinsopp, "Isaiah 56-66: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary," in *The Anchor Bible Yale Commentary* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 178-179, Logos Bible Software.

[8] John D. Watts, "Isaiah 34-66," in *Word Biblical Commentary*, ed. Bruce Metzger (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 840.

came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, 'Take off the grave clothes and let him go'" (Jn. 11:44). However, unlike Lazarus, the Jewish community of Isaiah chapter fifty-eight is still bound socially and economically. Blenkinsopp describes their social condition as such, "But conditions in the early years of Persian rule could have been as bad or worse-given drought, bad harvests, lack of employment, inflation, and social unrest (Hg. 1:5-6, 2:16-11, Zec. 8:10.)"[9] Both Haggai and Zechariah give insight to social and economic bondage of the people in those early years of Persian rule. Haggai speaks to the economic struggles of the Jewish community. They are no longer in Babylon, but their harvests are not representative of what has been sown into the soil of their community. The community is a food desert because the people do not have an adequate food supply. Inflation plagues the community because their wages are not enough to purchase the necessities of life. Haggai, just as Isaiah, connects the community's social condition to their spiritual condition. "Now, this is what the LORD Almighty says: 'Give careful thought to your ways" (Hag. 1:5). These communities were in ruin because God's house was still in ruins.

Zechariah alludes to the community being in ruins also because of low or no wages, but also because of the alarmingly high crime rate. "Before that time there were no wages for people or hire for animals. No one could go about their business safely because of their enemies, since I had turned everyone against their neighbor" (Zec. 8:10). Businesses were hurting and suffering because of the escalating crime rate. The value of the community's homes was depreciating at an alarming rate because of the vicious and ferocious social context. John Goldingay believes that the terrible social conditions were

[9] Blenkinsopp, "Isaiah 56-66," 178-179.

due to terrible leadership in the community. Goldingay ties this thought to Isaiah 58:1012 when he states, "The point about verses 10-12 is that those who ought to act as lookouts for the community (people such as priests and prophets) are failing to do so and are therefore leaving the community vulnerable to attack."[10] Too many leaders were pointing fingers at one another instead of trying to alleviate the social ills of that day. Even today, there are still leaders in the Christian community who are too busy pointing fingers when they should be using their hands to do the work of the Lord by way of social justice.

Yet, there is hope for the community! God, through Haggai and Zechariah, just as He does with Isaiah in Isaiah chapter fifty-eight, promises to do something new and fresh in the Jewish community. Through the prophetic voice of Zechariah, the Lord declares, "But now I will not deal with the remnant of this people as I did in the past" (Zec. 8:11). God would not send them back to captivity but would permit them to experience true spiritual, economic, and social freedom. Haggai speaks to the fact that the new temple would represent something greater and glorious in the Jewish community. The infinite resources of God would be ready and available for their use. Haggai says, "The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, 'declares the LORD Almighty'" (Hag. 2:8).

The voice of the prophet Isaiah cries out as one in the wilderness for the people who once lived in a thriving community to move beyond a chronic survival mode by rebuilding the ancient ruins, raising up the age-old foundations, repairing the broken walls, and restoring the streets of dwellings.

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[10] John Goldingay, "Isaiah" *Understanding the Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 1995), 473, ProQuest Ebook Central.

Immediate Context of Isaiah 58:8-11

The immediate context of Isaiah 58:12 is found in the verses that precede it, Isaiah 58:8-11. Understanding of Isaiah 58:12 can only be achieved by investigating the significance of these verses of scripture. According to Lozano, "The word 'az' in Hebrew shows that what follows is a direct engagement with those actions of true piety followed by true praxis."[11] True belief will result in godly behavior. Christian doctrine always produces real and relevant Christian duty. The church's audio will be in concord and agreement with its video. The truth is highlighted and brought into baring by Isaiah using the adverb "then" three times in Isaiah 58:8-11. "Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear" (Is. 58:8a). The next line of Isaiah 58:8 reads, "then your righteousness shall go before you." Finally, Isaiah says in Isaiah 58:9, "Then you will call, and the LORD will answer." It is interesting that in this conditional statement presented by Isaiah, the "then" comes before the" if." Typically, in conditional clauses, the "if" precedes the "then." The interchange of the "if" and the "then" cannot thwart the promises of God. Nevertheless, the conditions are clear; there must be a change if the blessings of God are to flow in this community. Goldingay argues, "Yahweh challenges the powerful community not only to free the people from bondage to debt but also to avoid practices that can get people into bondage."[12] Listen to the challenge put forth by Isaiah, "If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like

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[11] Lozano, "NBBC, Isaiah 40-66," 175.

[12] Goldingay, "Isaiah," 484.

the noonday" (Is. 58:9b-10). Those in power must be intentional about breaking the yoke of worldly systems that are under the demonic influence of Satan. In Isaiah's day, the Jewish community was the light, and now the church must be that light that breaks forth amid the darkness.

The Jewish community could fulfill the prophecy in Isaiah 58:12 with the omniscient and omnipotent assistance of the Almighty God. The immediate context preceding Isaiah 58:12 also informs the community of how God would enable them to succeed. Isaiah 58:11 says, "The LORD will guide you always; He will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring that waters never fail." First, the community would have to depend on the guidance of God, not some of the time but always. This would be a challenge to the remnant that returned from Babylon not to repeat the mistakes of the past. Not following the guidance and commandments of God is what sent the Jewish people into Babylonian captivity for seventy long years. It was an injustice that got them in trouble prior to captivity in Babylon. Wolterstorff says, "By issuing the Torah, God has established a matrix of obligations for the ordering of Israel's life. Insofar as Israel follows those rules of obligation, her life is rightly ordered, and justice is present in the land."[13] If they obeyed the obligations of the Torah, then God would bless them. If they disobeyed the obligations of the Torah, then God would curse them. Through the prophetic voice of Isaiah, God promises to guide them through the darkness that plagues their community if they continually follow His guidance. Goldingay is correct: "The destiny of the community, the restoration of blessings, and the fulfillment of promises

[13] Wolterstorff, "Justice in the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible: In Justice Rights and Wrongs," 89.

depend on the community's commitment."[14] The community would have to be committed to being selfless. The community would have to be willing to sacrifice. The community would have to be willing to serve. Goldingay alludes to what this selflessness, sacrifice, and service looks like: "That means the powerful must be committed to a spirituality of generosity rather than a practice of accumulation."[15]

Yael Avrahami says, "Prophetic writings are typically rich with rhetorical devices, and the scholarly exploration of the rhetoric of the prophets is a long-standing enterprise."[16] Isaiah, in Isaiah chapter five, compares Israel to a vineyard that had been planted and worked but had not produced fruit. A people that had been given many privileges but had not fulfilled their responsibilities. Now, Isaiah uses the literary technique of rhetoric to describe the future blessings of this community. Isaiah says, "You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail" (Is. 58:11b). Isaiah speaks in a paradoxical and oxymoronic fashion as he speaks of these "watered gardens" and "springs" being satisfied by God in a sun scorched land. Oh, what a blessed assurance it is to know that God is forever and always will be Jehovah Jireh even in a barren land. God can lift a community from depths of poverty to the heights of prosperity and blessings. The power and provisions of God would enable the community to fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah 58:12.

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[14] Goldingay, "Isaiah," 484-485.

[15] Goldingay, "Isaiah," 485.

[16] Yael Avrahami, "Foul Grapes: Figurative Smells and the Message of the Song of the Vineyard (Isaiah 5:1-7)," *Vetus Testamentum* 67, no. 3 (2017): 341.

Exegesis of Isaiah 58:12

The Jewish community post Babylonian captivity would be busy reviving, restoring, and rejuvenating their homeland. According to John A. Martin, "If they would do away with oppression and gossip and would help others in need, then the Lord would bless them. He would give guidance, satisfaction, strength, fertility, and physical restoration (rebuilding the ruins)."[17] It would not be an easy task but now with their spiritual lives in order they could now begin the momentous assignment of rebuilding ancient ruins and raising the age-old foundations. Isaiah says, "Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age-old foundations; you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings" (Is. 58:12).

Rebuilding the Ancient Ruins and Raising Up the Age-Old Foundations

As soon as the feet of the exiles landed in Jerusalem, they were to begin rebuilding. Keil and Delitzsch say, "The members born to the congregation in exile will begin, as soon as they return home, to build up again the ruins of olden time and the foundations of earlier generations."[18] During their time in exile, they probably rehearsed the promise given to Jeremiah concerning their hope of returning to their native land. Jeremiah, in the letter to the exiles, wrote, "This is what the LORD says: 'When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans to

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[17] John A. Martin, "Isaiah," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, eds. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 1113.

[18] Carl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 7 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 558.

prosper you and not harm you, plans to give you hope and a future" (Jer. 29:10-11). The community's hope in God would inspire them to immediately begin rebuilding the ancient ruins and raising up the age-old foundations.

An investigation into the etymological meaning of the words "rebuild" and "raise" opens a window that permits us to peek at the activity of this Jewish community upon their return from Babylon. The Hebrew word for "rebuild" is the word "banah." W. E. Vine says, "One of the meanings of banah can also refer to rebuilding something that is destroyed."[19] What ancient ruins in Jerusalem had been destroyed and now needed to be rebuilt in the text? The ancient ruins are a reference to the buildings of the city, especially the temple, which was the place of worship. The blessings of the people were connected to the rebuilding of the place of worship. Rebuilding the ancient ruins was not just about rebuilding buildings but also about rebuilding their belief system. The community would have to go beyond rebuilding alters in the sanctuary and begin to rebuild alters to God in their hearts. Their hearts would have to be saturated with justice and righteousness like the days of old. H. G. M. Williamson argues this point, "In Isaiah chapter 1, for example, they are used to highlight what is regarded as a past golden age, presumably the days of David and Solomon, when Jerusalem 'was full of justice, righteousness lodged in her."[20] The morality that existed in the ancient golden days of David and Solomon would now have to permeate the community as they rebuilt both

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[19] W. E. Vine, Merril F. Unger, and William White Jr., *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Nashville, TN: T. Nelson, 1996), 26.

[20] H. G. M. Williamson, *Prophetic Justice: In He Has Shown You What is Good: Old Testament Justice Then and Now* (Cambridge, UK: Lutterworth Press, 2012), 66.

spiritually and physically. Second Samuel 8:15 says, “David reigned over all Israel, doing what was just and right for all his people.”

Isaiah 58:12 also reveals in what order the rebuilding process would take place. First, the rebuilding of the community’s physical and spiritual temple. Next, would be the rebuilding of the walls of the city. The rebuilding of the walls is what Isaiah references when he says in the text, “and will raise up the age-old foundations.” In essence the people would have to raise up the walls that once stood. Raise up in Hebrew is the word “koom.” Leonard J. Coopes shines the light on the nuanced yet descriptive meaning of the word, which can mean “to rise, arise, stand, height, standing grain, adversary, uprightness, substance and existence.”[21] The meaning of “raise up” being alluded to as “standing grain” is indeed powerful. The first thought is of the standing grain in life and dreams of Joseph in the Book of Genesis. Joseph dreamed a dream and said to his brothers, “We were binding sheaves of grain out in the field when suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright, while your sheaves gathered around mine and bowed down to it” (Gn. 37:7). The rebuilding and raising of the walls would allow the people to dream dreams again of being a great nation. They could finally put the nightmare of Babylon behind them.

Rebuilding the ancient ruins and raising the walls would be a daunting task for the Jewish community after the Babylonian exile because the community lacked resources. Like minority communities today people want to rebuild but the resources are just not available to minorities. This is a point of tension in the text. How would the people who

[21] Leonard J. Coppes, “1999 קום,” *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament,* eds. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1999), 793.

were in poverty themselves rebuild ancient ruins and raise age-old foundations? Good news came to the community through a decree sent out by Cyrus of Persia. F. Charles Fensham writes, "In accordance with spirit of the decree of Cyrus in which special attention was given to minority groups, a proclamation by herald was sent out to be communicated to the various Jewish communities."[22] Special attention would be given to this minority group to rebuild their homeland. It is the same type of special attention that needs to be given to minority communities today to rebuild impoverished communities. The Jewish community not only received support from King Cyrus but also from King Darius. Watts says, "Darius's destiny, to fulfill the assignments first given to Cyrus and to himself, will be accomplished when he has acted to meet these social and economic needs."[23] Later on in the rebuilding process King Artaxerxes would support this minority community financially. Watts goes on to state, "In a later time, Ezra 4:7-24, and Nehemiah 2:1-9 attribute the achievements of Ezra and Nehemiah in part to the support of Artaxerxes."[24] The Jewish community would thrive because of the sovereignty of God manifested through the generosity of kings. "In the LORD's hand the king's heart is a stream of water that he channels toward all who please Him" (Prov. 21:1).

God brought these exiles back to their homeland and opened a door for the rebuilding of ancient ruins and raising of age-old foundations. However, divinely open doors will always come with demonic opposition. The Apostle states this truth in 1

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[22] Charles F. Fensham, "The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah," in *The New International Commentary of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1982), 50.

[23] John D. Watts, "Isaiah 34-66," in *Word Biblical Commentary*, ed. Bruce Metzger (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 844.

[24] Watts, "Isaiah 34-66," 844.

Corinthians 16:9 says, “Because a great door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many who oppose me.” The Jewish community was energetic about rebuilding the ancient ruins and raising the age-old foundations, but their enthusiasm was countered by the criticism and hatred of enemies. They learned quickly that not everyone will be excited about God’s people doing God’s work in the community. According to Fensham, “In Ezra chapter 3 the beginning of the building activities is sketched, but the temple is not completed till twenty years later in the reign of Darius. In Ezra 4:1-5, the reason for this delay is given. The enemies of Judah and Benjamin.”[25] The people’s enemies revolted against them to stop the progress that was taking place in the community. There has been some debate about whether the enemies were those from without the community or those from within the community. Fensham alludes to the argument when he says, “Some scholars argue that the ‘people of the land’ was originally used here.”[26] It is safe to say that the greatest opposition when rebuilding a community does not come from without but from those that live within that community. Nehemiah puts forth the challenge to stay on the wall even when faced with opposition. “Sanballat and Geshem sent me this message: ‘Come, let us meet together in one of the villages on the plain of Ono.’ But they were scheming to harm me; so I sent messengers to them with this reply: ‘I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you’” (Neh. 6:2-3).

[25] Fensham, “The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah,” 65.

[26] Fensham, “The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah,” 65.

Repairers of the Breach and Restorers of the Streets

There is a shift in the text from the Jewish community's activity to their identity. The activity of the community was rebuilding ancient ruins and raising age-old foundations. Isaiah alludes to the fact that they would now have a new identity. The text says, "you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, and Restorer of Streets with Dwellings." They would be identified by their benevolent work.

The Hebrew meaning of the words "raise" and "repairer" shines light on the difference between a raiser of walls and a repairer of walls. James Strong defines repairer "with the Hebrew word gadar, which means to wall in or around, close up, hedge, or enclose."[27] Walls can be elevated and erected but still have breaches or gaps in them. Even with the physical walls up, the community would still have to be diligent in working to close the gaps in injustice. Could this community be satisfied with erected walls that contained gaps and holes? Could the people afford to ignore the gaps and holes in the wall? Victor P. Hamilton presents an interesting nuance to the meaning of the word "breach" in Hebrew. Hamilton says, "Paras does not mean simply 'to punch a hole through' but 'to level, raze.' Another important nuance of paras is 'to increase' or 'to break through.'"[28] Simply put, the breakthrough of the community was dependent on repairing what had already been broken through. No increase would come without living up to their calling as Repairer of Broken Walls.

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[27] James Strong, *A Concise Dictionary of the Words in the Greek Testament and The Hebrew Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2009), 26.

[28] Hamilton, "1826 צָרַץ," *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament,* eds. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1999), 737–738.

Not only is the Jewish community identified as Repairer of Broken Walls, but they were also called Restorer of Streets. They would not be responsible for restoring uninhabited streets, but inhabited streets. They would restore communities with houses on the streets. George M. Landes defines restorer in Hebrew with several meanings, such as, "to turn back (to God), return; turn away from, abandon, to restore, and to convert from evil."[29] The word that Isaiah uses for restorer in Hebrew suggests that restoration would come to the streets and homes of the community only by way of repentance. How would they bring healing and help to this broken community? By way of a repentance that does not just revolve around spiritual talk, but a spiritual walk. The community needs to fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah 58:12 would have to lose the chains of injustice, feed the hungry, house the homeless, clothe the naked, and love their neighbor as they love themselves.

Summary

Isaiah 58:12 is foundational to the Doctor of Ministry Project for several reasons. The blight and poverty experienced by the exiles returning from Babylonian captivity mirror the rural community in which the project will take place.. The spiritual apathy spoken out against in Isaiah chapter fifty-eight is still prevalent today among Christians, which leads to financial, economic, and social ruin in communities. Warren Wiersbe states, "When you strive to be a spiritual person, you fight the constant battle of 'ritual versus reality.' It is much easier to go through the external activities of religion than it is

[29] George M. Landes, *Building Your Biblical Hebrew Vocabulary: Learning Words by Frequency and Cognate*, vol. 41 (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001), 52.

to love God from your heart and let that love touch the lives of others."[30] Christians still struggle today with practicing a religion that is real or one based upon rituals. Social justice is the avenue by which the local church, even in rural communities, can touch the lives of others. Touching the lives of others by providing the tools to repair broken walls and restore the streets of dwelling.

What is the vehicle that can be used by the local church in rural communities to be the Repairer of Broken Walls and the Restorer of the Streets? If a model is developed for congregations to develop non-profit organizations, then access to the tools necessary for community partnerships can be leveraged to alleviate chronic poverty. The Jewish community that Isaiah speaks to in Isaiah 58:12 was able to leverage their partnerships with King Cyrus, King Darius, and King Artaxerxes of Persia. The Jewish community was able to bring about economic and social stability to the community through these relationships. By way of non-profit organizations, rural churches in rural communities can access resources by way of local banks, foundations, appropriations, and government agencies to recover from the effects of Covid-19 and inflation on the local church's resources. Rural churches have the divine responsibility of rebuilding the ancient ruins and raising the age-old foundations.

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[30] Warren W. Wiersbe, *With the Word Bible Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1991), Is. 58.

CHAPTER THREE

HISTORICAL FOUNDATION

The American Civil War from 1861 to 1865 depicts very turbulent times in American history. The nation was divided between the North and the South because of the social atrocity of slavery. The nation was in turmoil because of the devaluing of a human being's personhood, totally based on the pigmentation of their skin. No matter how gruesome, grisly, and ghastly the American Civil War was, it also marked a turning point in American history. It was a turning point because it was the death of the Confederacy and slavery. This era in history became a tomb for horrors that should never have seen the light of day ever again in human history. However, this same era also provided a womb for the birthing of the social Gospel movement. According to Wendy J. Deichmann, "The social Gospel movement in the United States was a faith-based, grassroots movement of laity and clergy in the aftermath of the Civil War."[1] The movement being faith-based means the community of faith rose to the occasion to heal the social ills of society. God moved laity and clergy of congregations who were simply ordinary people to do extraordinary things to enhance their communities. Change was not left in the sole hands of the clergy, but clergy and laity joined hand in hand to bring stability to an unstable nation. Deichmann says, "During this era, American society faced

[1] Wendy J. Deichmann, "The Social Gospel as a Grassroots Movement," *Church History* 84, no. 1 (n.d.): 203.

extreme levels of social instability resulting not only from wartime trauma and loss, but also relocation of massive numbers of those emancipated from slavery, a rapidly accelerated pace of both industrialization and urbanization and unprecedented waves of immigration."[2] The church like the men of Issachar found itself having to adjust or shift to meet the needs of the present age. The Bible says concerning the men of Issachar, "from Issachar, men who understood the times and knew what Israel do-200 chiefs should, with all their relatives under their command" (1 Chron. 12:32). The church had a social responsibility based on the Gospel of Jesus Christ to minister to heal the trauma caused by the war, provide programs to lift freed slaves from poverty, and to train parishioners for the shift from an agrarian workplace to one of industrialization and urbanization. Gina A. Zurlo states, "The major thrust of the movement was the idea that Christians had a responsibility in an industrialized, urbanized, and rapidly changing world to apply Christian values and ethics to societal problems and work toward bettering the world for the kingdom of God."[3] Today, the church has a social responsibility to minister to the needs of the people who face trauma because of Covid-19, to assist black males who have been freed from incarceration, and lend a helping hand to those who face the shift in the nation's workplace due to technological advancements as well as artificial intelligence.

The social Gospel movement provides a foundation for the church and the faith-based community to develop programs to alleviate chronic and systemic poverty. A

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[2] Diechmann, "The Social Gospel as a Grassroots Movement," 203.

[3] Gina A. Zurlo, "The Social Gospel Ecumenical Movement, and Christian Sociology: The Institute of Social and Religious Research," *The American Sociologist* 46, no. 2 (2015): 178.

thorough examination of the social Gospel movement points to this truth. The poverty after the Civil War and during Reconstruction permeated and saturated American society. The transition from agricultural to industrialization, one would have thought, should have caused the nation to prosper, but it caused the nation to plunge into poverty. This was the belief of Pierre Jacobs. "America was in a state of social transition as industrialization led to rapid urbanization. This led to a rise in squalor and poverty that shocked Americans."[4] The squalor and poverty shocked Americans, but it mobilized and revitalized the church. Clergy and the great theological minds of the late nineteenth century moved into action to develop practical and timely programming to combat poverty. Jacobs quotes Wystma when he says, "The Social Gospel, on the other hand, was driven by the 'Progressive movement and Christian postmillennialism' that believed the 'positive forces of industrialization could be matched by positive social programs in an effort to help society…into a new and just society.'"[5] Furthermore, Jacob names the clergy of that era who were very influential in the programs that were developed during the social Gospel movement. According to Pierre, "Leading American pastors and theologians active in the movement during the period 1890-1945 were, among others, Shailer Matthews, Walter Rasuschenbusch, and Washington Gladden."[6] These shepherds of God's sheep were pivotal in leading their congregations and communities beside still waters and through the valley of the shadow of death by the implementation of various programs because of the

[4] Pierre Jacobs, "The Social Gospel Movement Revisited: Consequences for the Church: Original Research," *HTS: Theological Studies* 71, no. 3 (2015): 2.

[5] Jacobs, "The Social Gospel Movement Revisited," 2.

[6] Jacobs, "The Social Gospel Movement Revisited," 2.

social Gospel movement. “They lobbied for safety legislation for factories, child workers, and public health regulations.”[7]

The clergy of that era were swept away by the powerful waves of social consciousness and social justice of the social Gospel movement spoke out and spoke up for the least of these. Men like Matthews, Rauschenbusch, and Gladden moved into action. They were socially awake! “The Social Gospel was the attempt of conscientious Christians to respond to the social inequity of its time.”[8] The social conscientiousness and the success of the social Gospel movement carried out by the church to alleviate social ills such as poverty are directly connected to the scriptures, the character and nature of Christ, and the church, despite denominational affiliations.

The Social Gospel Movement and The Scriptures

Since the conception of the social Gospel movement following the Civil War, conservative Christians have made attempts to disqualify the social Gospel movement. Conservatives’ attempts to disqualify the social Gospel movement are rooted and grounded in disconnecting the movement from the Word of God. Charles Howard Hopkins, in his writings, argues adamantly that the social Gospel movement was born out of socialism. Jacob A. Dorn argues this point: “It is not surprising, therefore, that one of the pioneer historians of the Social Gospel, Charles Howard Hopkins, should call

[7] Jacobs, “The Social Gospel Movement Revisited,” 2.

[8] Jacobs, “The Social Gospel Movement Revisited,” 2.

socialism 'the midwife and nurse to the social Gospel.'"[9] Furthermore, Hopkins suggests that capitalism pushed the Protestant church in America into a form of socialism that manifests itself by way of the social Gospel movement. Hopkins believed, "No single force so stung American Protestantism into social action as did this gadfly of capitalism."[10] However, often the power of social action cannot overcome the heresy of conservative Christians who try to connect socialism and the social Gospel movement to communism. As soon as they hear trigger words such as socialism or social Gospel, they immediately and erroneously tie the movement to Karl Marx, Joseph Stalin, and Vladimir Lenin. Much has not changed in the world today. Pierre Jacobs quotes Helder Camara, who said, "When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist."[11] Clergy who embraced the social Gospel movement of this error were in many ways considered to be those who practice eisegesis or even worse heretics because many believed that the social Gospel movement was not based on the word of God. Jacob Dorn writes, "As for those who attempted to ground socialism in the Christian faith, Peabody viewed their effort as unhistorical and unbiblical."[12] The clergy and laity of the social Gospel movement who worked tirelessly to lift humanity out of the pit of poverty did not work in vain because the movement is rooted and grounded in scripture.

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[9] Jacob H. Dorn, "The Social Gospel and Socialism: A Comparison of the Thought of Francis Greenwood Peabody, Washington Gladden, and Walter Rauschenbusch," *Church History* 62, no. 1 (1993): 82.

[10] Charles Hopkins, *The Rise of Social in American Protestantism, 1865-1915* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1940), 244.

[11] Jacobs, "The Social Gospel Movement Revisited," 1.

[12] Dorn, "The Social Gospel and Socialism," 85.

When the definition of the social Gospel is examined thoroughly, then it becomes crystal clear that the movement was born out of the Bible. The passion of laity and clergy during this era to carry out the social Gospel movement was driven by the inspired, inerrant, infallible, inexhaustible, and indestructible word of God. Wendy J. Deichmann says, "As defined by social proponent Shailer Matthews, the social Gospel was, simply, 'the application of the teaching of Jesus and the total message of the Christian salvation society, the economic life, and social institutions such as the state, the family, as well as to individuals.'"[13] Furthermore, Deichmann alludes to the fact that the social Gospel is directly connected to the Great Commandments of the Bible. "The theological emphases of the social Gospel movement revolved around the commonplace understandings of the biblical teachings of Jesus. These include the advent of the kingdom of God, the first and second Great Commandments (one must love God above all else and one's neighbor as oneself) and the Golden Rule (one should treat others the way one would want to be treated)."[14] The conservative Christian who attempts to disconnect the social justice movement from the Bible now engages in eisegesis while the progressive Christian who passionately moves to alleviate poverty and social ills engages in exegesis.

Biblical truth is historical, universal, and eternal. Jesus' teachings on the Great Commandment that undergirded the social Gospel movement is a fact of history. The truth is eternal, which means it is timeless. Finally, the truth is universal because it works everywhere. The social Gospel approach of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries

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[13] Wendy J. Deichmann, "The Social Gospel as a Grassroots Movement," *Church History* 84, no. 1 (n.d.): 203.

[14] Deichmann, "The Social Gospel as a Grassroots Movement," 203.

continue to be effective today. Such is the case not only with churches in America but even in South Africa. The concept of South African churches implementing many of the principles of the social Gospel movement was introduced by Pierre Jacobs. According to Jacobs, "The church as institution and as part of the ecumenical church has to consider being more proactive about the status quo in South Africa."[15] Even in South Africa today, the church is trying to be intentional about living out the words of Jesus to lift the downtrodden. The church, with intentionality, casts its eyes upon those who are not just suffering spiritually but also socially. Pierre writes, "However, the question of whether the Church can overlook the plea of the oppressed, if only those surrounding the churches geographically, remains relevant and needs to be analyzed through the lens of scripture."[16] The church, because of the biblical mandate, cannot overlook those who are suffering, whether in America or South Africa. The church, at the conception of the social Gospel movement, views the plight of society through the lens of scripture, and the church today does the same. Not to view the social Gospel movement through the lens of scripture is to be blinded by the God of this age.

The Social Gospel Movement and the Character and Nature of Christ

Not only is the social Gospel movement of the late nineteenth century rooted in the word of God, but when the church engages in social programs to uplift humanity, it demonstrates the nature and character of Christ. The word teaches us that Jesus is the Word made flesh who revealed to humanity God's grace and truth. "The Word became

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[15] Jacobs, "The Social Gospel Movement Revisited," 1.

[16] Jacobs, "The Social Gospel Movement Revisited," 1.

flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (Jn. 1:14). Paul, in the letter to the church at Rome declares that Jesus reveals the righteousness of God. "For in the Gospel the righteousness of God is revealed a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith'" (Rom. 1:17). Francis Peabody in his book written in 1900, entitled *Jesus Christ and the Social Quest***ion,** argues that Jesus only revealed social issues but did not reform social issues. According to Jacob Dorn, "For Peabody, Jesus was 'not a reformer but a revealer,' 'not primarily an agitator with a plan, but an idealist with a vision.'"[17] Peabody presents a skewed summation of the ministry and message of Jesus that was not the belief system of those who were trailblazers of the social Gospel movement. Jesus did not come all the way from heaven to earth to reveal sin but to reform the sinful systems of the world that plague society. Jesus, the true founder of the social Gospel movement, came with a vision, but He also carried out a mission.

During the social Gospel movement, there were Christians who caught the vision and carried out the mission of Jesus. William Gladden was one of the pioneers who caught the vision and carried out the vision of Jesus. Gladden achieved this by way of pragmatic programming. An agitator with a plan like Jesus, Gladden's pragmatic social programs were successful because he lived beyond the land of the theoretical and moved into the promised, fruitful land of the practical. Dorn suggests something about Gladden, "He was also a pragmatist who tested programs' workability and emphasized the next steps to be taken. His ideas about labor relations, race, municipal reform, and poverty

[17] Dorn, "The Social Gospel and Socialism," 86.

reveal great flexibility in the light of changing conditions and fresh information."[18] Gladden was on the front lines, not just revealing but reforming issues such as race, labor, and poverty that permeated the nation because of the Civil War, Reconstruction, and the Industrial Revolution. Gladden, as pastor of the First Congregational Church of Columbus, Ohio, argued, "the regeneration of persons and structural change must be concurrent."[19] Regenerated people living in a community should impact that community by way of social reforms. The Church should reform and transform Corinth and not conform to Corinth. "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing, and perfect will" (Rom. 12:2).

Walter Rauschenbusch also was not just a revealer but a reformer during the social Gospel movement. Rauschenbusch's passion for social reforms was driven by a healthy dose of optimism and pessimism. Social reformers can acknowledge the good in society without ignoring the bad. Social Gospel supporters were optimistic about the progress of human society. Yet, they saw signs of what they deemed 'evil' and 'sin' all around them, obstacles to the coming kingdom of God."[20] They did not only see or call out the evil and sin but moved to do something about what they deemed as societal sin. According to Zurlo, "The new forms of 'societal evil' that accompanied modernization became the

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[18] Dorn, "The Social Gospel and Socialism," 87.

[19] Dorn, "The Social Gospel and Socialism," 87.

[20] Gina A. Zurlo, "The Social Gospel Ecumenical Movement, and Christian Sociology: The Institute of Social and Religious Research," *The American Sociologist* 46, no. 2 (2015): 179.

pressing social problems of their day. They believed that working toward eradicating evil from society would hasten the kingdom of God and ready the world for Jesus' rule."[21]

One cannot mention a true reformer walking in the footsteps of Jesus without mentioning Martin Luther King, Jr. As a civil rights activist, King became one of the most notable religious leaders of the social Gospel movement. Vanessa Cook argues that the activism of King was shaped and driven by the long social Gospel movement. Cook says, "For the rest of his life, King kept the social Gospel central to his radical thought and practice, while never abandoning his black Baptist roots."[22] King provides a model for all Christians to mimic and emulate the life of Jesus by lifting communities out of the abyss of poverty and racial discrimination. Notice two words presented by Cook, and those words are "black Baptist." The social Gospel for King could never just be about revelation, but it also had to center around reformation because his race and religion are inseparable. Today, there are many within Christendom who argue that the synthesis of race and religion in some way dilutes the power of the Gospel. However, King shows us that for the black preacher the Gospel cannot be viewed authentically without viewing it through the lens or filter of race. The synthesis of race and religion is what makes the Gospel real and relevant for those who model the character of Jesus as a reformer. Such synergy between race and religion can bring about long-term effective change in a community.

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[21] Zurlo, "The Social Gospel Ecumenical Movement, and Christian Sociology," 179.

[22] Vanessa Cook, "Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Long Social Gospel Movement," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 26, no. 1 (2016): 75.

The Social Gospel and the Church Despite Denominational Affiliations

The social Gospel movement of the late nineteenth century crossed denominational lines. Both Protestants and Catholics saw the imperative need for the church to combat societal evils and social ills by way of the social Gospel. Of course, this effort in many of the denominations was led by clergy, but in many instances, the movement was led by women. In the United Methodist Church, there was a group of women in the St. Mark's congregation of New Orleans, Louisiana. According to Ellen Blue, St. Mark's and the Social Gospel is not a traditional biography, because not one of these women – not those who worked in 1895 nor those who worked in 1965, not any of their sisters in between – was "regarded as biographical material."[23] Like many women who have made contributions to great movements, these female giants of the faith have been ignored. Their story of causing change through their church and denomination is worth telling. Blue writes, "It is a story of white, southern women, about Methodist women, women who were products of their own time and place but who also challenged the prevailing culture in both subtle and dramatic ways, and who brought about substantial change in New Orleans."[24]

How did these women bring about impact to their community by way of the social Gospel? They did it by creating what were called settlement houses. What were settlement houses? Blue defines settlement houses in this way, "Settlement houses were not, as the name might imply, focused on providing housing for the needy. Rather they

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[23] Ellen Blue, *St. Mark's and the Social Gospel: Methodist Women and Civil Rights in New Orleans, 1895-1965* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2011): 1.

[24] Blue, *St. Mark's and the Social Gospel,* 1.

were facilities that allowed well-educated women to live in low-income neighborhoods, learning from their neighbors as they got to know them about what their true needs were."[25] These United Methodist women exhibited one of the truths of the social Gospel movement, which causes one to move beyond their comfort zone to help someone in need. It is the teaching of Jesus in action as one abandons the creature comforts of life to meet the needs of God's creatures that are the least of these. It is the manifestation of loving your neighbor or neighborhood as much as you love yourself. "Settlements were designed on the one hand to provide an oasis of calm and beauty for people whose daily lives in dirty factories and crowded tenements tended toward chaos, but they were also designed to give the settlement workers a deep, experiential understanding of how they could best help the neighborhood."[26] They knew what the neighborhood's pains, hurts, needs, and values were by way of practice and not theory. They built relationships, which made it easier for them to be change agents in these communities. According to Blue, "The professional deaconesses and the laywomen forged not only working alliances that enabled them to ease the harsh living conditions of immigrants and laborers, but also deep, lasting friendships. These relationships created a community of women who understood and appreciated each other's abilities, desires, and commitments to social change.[27]

Methodist women not only took the lead in bringing about social change by way of the social Gospel, but Methodist male clergy played a vital role. Christopher Evans

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[25] Blue, *St. Mark's and the Social Gospel* 1.

[26] Blue, *St. Mark's and the Social Gospel*, 1.

[27] Blue, *St. Mark's and the Social Gospel*, 3.

writes, "In late 1894, William Carwardine, a Chicago-area Methodist minister, published his account of the Pullman Palace Car Company strike that had occurred earlier in the year."[28] First, the need for social change was not limited to geography at the rise of the social Gospel movement. Whether it was New Orleans in the south as it concerns Methodist women of Chicago in the north, as it concerns Methodist male clergy, these Christians refused to remain on the sidelines. They refused to sit on the sidelines even when government and more conservative clergy sided with the social evils of the Pullman Palace Car Company. According to Evans, "Carwardine represented a small faction of Chicago clergy who had taken leadership role in supporting the strikers, and asserted in his book that religious leaders had a moral obligation to stand up for worker rights."[29] Social Gospel preachers recognize that the majority is not always right. They practice the principles of Jesus who not only saved a person's soul but also met their human needs. It is what was James refers to in his epistle as a faith that works. James says, "Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,' but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action is dead" (Jam. 2:15-17). Carwardine believed like James that faith without works is dead. Carwardine wrote in his book:

> I contend now that in discussing of this theme I am preaching the Gospel of applied Christianity – applied to humanity – the Gospel of mutual recognition, of co-operation, of the 'brotherhood of humanity.' The relationship existing between a man's body and his soul are such that you can make very little headway

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[28] Christopher Hodge Evans, *The Social Gospel in American Religion: A History* (New York, NY: NYU Press, 2017), 47.

[29] Evans, *The Social Gospel in American Religion*, 47.

> appealing to the soul of a thoroughly live and healthy man if he be starving for food.[30]

The impact of the social Gospel movement was not limited to the United Methodist Church, but the movement's impact was realized in the Congregational Church. Evans says, "In the early 1890s Charles Sheldon, a midwestern Congregational minister, wrestled with how to address Christianity's relationship to social problems in his Topeka, Kansas, church."[31] Once again, the social Gospel's impact was not restricted to a region of the United States nor to a particular denomination. One of Sheldon's greatest contributions to the social Gospel movement was his book entitled *In His Steps*. "The book tells the story of a young minister who challenges his congregation to walk in the footsteps of Jesus for one year, basing individual actions on the simple criterion of whether Jesus would engage in particular activities. Central to the book's narrative is the question that galvanized many people to embrace aspects of the social Gospel: What would Jesus do?"[32] It is a question that every Christian regardless of their denomination must ask themselves when faced with the social evils of society. What would Jesus do? When a community is permeated with poverty, what would Jesus do? When people cannot obtain affordable housing, what would Jesus do? When people cannot find a job that pays livable wages, what would Jesus do? When black and brown communities are food, medical, education, and commerce deserts, what would Jesus do? Evans suggests, "Sheldon believed, as did other 'evangelical liberals' in the social Gospel tradition, that

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[30] Evans, *The Social Gospel in American Religion*, 47.

[31] Evans, *The Social Gospel in American Religion,* 48.

[32] Evans, *The Social Gospel in American Religion*, 48.

one's willingness to make these sacrifices would have redemptive consequences for humankind."[33] Not just redemptive consequences for the soul but also for the community. One cannot wear the bracelet or slogan on a t-shirt asking, "what would Jesus do" and not embrace the social Gospel.

The reforms of the social Gospel movement were not limited to the North, South, or Midwest. Congregations in New Orleans, Chicago, and Topeka engaged the social Gospel to bring about social change. Once again, the movement crossed denominational lines even into the Episcopal Church. Evans states, "One of the major figures in the Episcopal Church, which embraced the model of British Christian socialism, was William Dwight Porter Bliss."[34] How did Bliss and his congregation bring about social change in their community? "In 1889, Bliss founded a small group of similar-minded Episcopalians, the Society of Christian Socialists, and in 1890, he organized in Boston a short-lived community, the Church of the Carpenter."[35] Jesus, in Matthew 7:12, put forth the Golden Rule, which has governed Christian relationships with one another and the community. Jesus says, "So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets" (Mt. 7:12). One would think that this rule alone would be the foundation for any church to engage in the social Gospel movement; however, this was not the case with Bliss' Church of the Carpenter. Evans argues, "Christian socialist like Bliss argued that Christianity needed more than faith in

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[33] Evans, *The Social Gospel in American Religion*, 49.

[34] Evans, *The Social Gospel in American Religion*, 52.

[35] Evans, *The Social Gospel in American Religion*, 52.

the Golden Rule to change society."[36] At the core of the Church of the Carpenter's outreach and social justice was whether the Golden Rule is enough for Christians to cause change in their communities. Were they challenging the Golden Rule given by Jesus, or were they challenging how the Golden Rule is carried out by Christians? Bliss and his supporters were not challenging the Golden Rule given by Jesus, but they were challenging whether Christians were carrying out the Golden Rule to bring about change in their communities. Bliss argues that following the Golden Rule cannot just be obeying Jesus, but moving into action like Jesus to heal social issues. According to Bliss, "Those sentimental Christians who say that all is necessary is for individuals to obey Christ are in danger, of saying 'Lord, Lord,' without showing what the Lord would have us do."[37] Bliss' argument is in concord and agreement with the teachings of the social Gospel movement that the community should see Christians living out their faith through service that addresses social issues. How did Bliss and the Church of the Carpenter live out the Golden Rule to uplift those living in their community? They served to cure social issues by fighting for legislation to ease the burden of those in their community affected by the Industrial Revolution. "For Bliss, true Christians needed support legislation to protect the rights of workers, including laws to limit work to an eight-hour day. It would reduce the hours of labor in factory and in shop, that men may have longer hours of labor in the home, the library, and the church."[38]

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[36] Evans, *The Social Gospel in American Religion*, 53.

[37] Evans, *The Social Gospel in American Religion*, 53.

[38] Evans, *The Social Gospel in American Religion*, 53.

The social Gospel movement was not limited to Protestant churches, but the movement also caught fire in the Catholic church. The Catholics were late to the party but better late than never. Paul Lubienecki says, "In the last part of the 19th and into the initial decades of the 20th centuries, it became acceptable to champion for social and labor reforms as Catholics, Protestants, and progressive activists increasingly campaigned to eradicate the social injustices of the nation's industrial surge. Some historians relegated Catholic programs as a replication of Protestant initiatives or as part of greater parochial outreach."[39] Protestants and progressives took the lead, but Catholics followed, as they also saw the need for social change in their communities. The Industrial Revolution's hazardous effects did not discriminate as to denominational or religious affiliation. There were as many poor Catholics as there were poor Protestants facing horrible working conditions, which caused a shift in the Catholic Church's approach to outreach and ministry. "Although many of the Catholic hierarchy supported the industrial capitalists, they recognized that the hazardous working environment and ensuing social and moral conditions demanded an improvement in the standard of living for the worker."[40] Therefore, the Catholic Church was intentional about developing programs during the social Gospel movement to uplift the common worker. The first program of this sort was developed and initiated in 1891. Lubienecki's description of the program is as follows: "The Catholic Church, through the initial social encyclical of *Rerum Novarum* (1891), intended to address the 'labor issue' but for a universal audience. That audience,

[39] Paul Lubienecki, "Social Reconstruction: American Catholics Radical Response to the Social Gospel Movement and Progressives," *Journal of Catholic Education* 24, no. 1 (2021): 83.

[40] Lubienecki, "Social Reconstruction," 83-84.

however was more European in nature. Americans, in their own unique and exceptionalist manner, interpreted the document to conform to their needs."[41] The Catholic Church's social Gospel efforts brought an international flavor to the movement that transcended continental boundaries. The movement must have been of the Lord to be able to transcend regions, countries, and even denominational affiliations.

Conclusion

The social Gospel movement is foundational to the Doctor of Ministry Project. Churches of all sizes, ethnicities, demographics, denominational backgrounds, and geographic locations face financial instability within and around them. The economic plight of rural congregations and their communities has increased drastically due to the impacts of inflation, the Covid-19 pandemic, and the hostile political climate that permeates the United States of America. If a model is developed for congregations to develop non-profit organizations, then access to the tools necessary for community partnerships can be leveraged to alleviate chronic poverty. This project, following Covid-19, directly coincides with the social Gospel movement that was in direct response to the effects of the Civil War and Industrial Revolution.

The social Gospel movement is a movement that began in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The movement was born out of the American Civil War and the Industrial Revolution. Both events affected urban and rural America drastically, causing an economic down spiral. It was the church that took the lead in bringing relief to those who found themselves among the least of these during the conception of the movement.

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[41] Lubienecki, "Social Reconstruction," 84.

According to Lubienecki, "Protestants implanted their social Gospel movement as a proposed cure to these problems."[42]

Even now, the church has a mandate based upon scripture to minister to the needs of mankind wholistically. The Gospel that one preaches and teaches must not only regenerate souls but also the community. The passion of clergy and laity during the social Gospel movement to uplift their communities out of the plight of poverty due to the effects of the Civil War and Industrial Revolution was rooted and grounded in the Word of God. Wendy Deichman is correct when she says, "The theological emphases of the social Gospel movement revolved around the commonplace understandings of the biblical

teachings of Jesus."[43] Therefore, the church has a mandate by way of the biblical teachings of Jesus to develop programs that lift people out of poverty.

The question must be asked as it was during the social Gospel movement, "What would Jesus do?" Jesus would implement at least a six-session program that crossed denominational and racial lines to help churches develop programs and partnerships with banks, local government, colleges and universities, and health care institutions to alleviate chronic poverty. Through these partnerships and embracing the teachings of Jesus, small churches can do mega ministry to impact their communities. According to Sandra Lynn Barnes, "Findings show that most sample clergy espouse a social Gospel message that reflects social justice, servanthood, and self-help themes. Community empowerment programs are also influenced by factors such as a pastor's vocation as well as church

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[42] Lubienecki, "Social Reconstruction," 83.

[43] Deichmann, "The Social Gospel as a Grassroots Movement," 203.

location and have a decidedly economic than political dimension."[44] The message and methods of the social Gospel movement are the pathway for small churches to manifest mega ministry in impoverished communities.

The Doctor of Ministry Project sets out to provide a model for churches in rural communities to engage in economic development by leveraging relationships with community partners through non-profit organizations. Such an endeavor is at the heart of the social Gospel movement. The social and economic climate of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries mirrors the declining social and economic climate of today in black rural communities. Therefore, the timeless truth of loving and caring for one's suffering community is applicable even today. The principles of the social Gospel movement will inform pastors and church leaders how to minister to the least of these by empowering them to implement programs for long-term change.

[44] Sandra Lynn Barnes, "Black Megachurches: Social Gospel Usage and Community Empowerment," *Journal of African American Studies* 15, no. 2 (2012): 177.

CHAPTER FOUR

THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION

Introduction

Automatically, one would view the social values of conservatives and liberals as the antithesis of one another. This is the case not only in politics but also becomes the reality in religious life, especially in Christianity. The term evangelical and liberation theology seems to be oxymoronic in nature. When the political climate of America is considered in the year 2024, it is evident that the white church and the black church are polarized. The white church places emphasis on moral issues such as abortion, same-sex marriage, and pornography, while the black church shines the light on the social issues that plague the lost, the least, the looked over, left out, and left behind of society. The rise of political ideology over theology has built walls within the body of Christ that the Savior was torn down on the cross of Calvary. The Apostle Paul states in Ephesians 3:14 NIV, "For He himself is our peace, who has made two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility." Is the tent of Christendom big enough for the beliefs of conservatives and liberals? The tent is indeed big enough for both the views of conservatives and liberals! Jesus Christ, who has torn down the wall between Jews and Gentiles, is more than capable and able to tear down the walls that separate conservatives and liberals in the body of Christ. There actually should be no wall at all because the

scriptures argue for synergy between conservatives and liberals as it concerns liberation theology.

When churches engage in projects to uplift the community socially, which ultimately leads to uplifting the community spiritually, it is not conservative or liberal. It is biblical. Churches do not err or commit biblical heresy when emphasis is placed on healing social issues that plague the community. Believers stand on a great theological and biblical foundation. Every pericope or passage of scripture from Genesis to Revelation is born out of some sort of theological belief. The biblical foundation for the Doctor of Ministry project can be found when one listens to the prophetic voice of the prophet Isaiah. The prophet Isaiah, who writes under the divine inspiration of the Holy Spirit, states in Isaiah 58:12, "And your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt, you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to dwell in." The voice of the prophet Isaiah cries out as one in the wilderness for the people who once lived in a thriving community to move beyond a chronic survival mode by rebuilding, raising up, repairing, and restoring.

As Isaiah cries as a voice in the wilderness, it becomes crystal clear that the ancient prophet's cry for financial justice and equity is undergirded by a biblically based liberation theology. Isaiah's prophetic voice does not just speak of a future eschatology, but it also opens the door for a realized eschatology when viewed through the lens of liberation theology. James D. Kirylo, in his article entitled, "Liberation Theology and Paul Freire," argues that Gustavo Gutierrez, the "father" of liberation theology would have been an adherent of this view of scripture. "The theology of liberation seeks to

provide a language for talking about God. It is an attempt to make the word of life present in a world of oppression, injustice, and death."[1] It is very feasible to believe that Isaiah set out during the return from Babylon to make the "inspired word" a living, realized, and relevant word as the returning exiles rebuilt their community. They rebuilt their community from ruins despite a climate of oppression, injustice, and death.

If there was ever an era in history where liberation theology flourished, then it was during the social Gospel movement. The social Gospel movement is a movement that began in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The movement was birthed from the American Civil War and the Industrial Revolution. Both events affected urban and rural America drastically, causing an economic downward spiral. It was the church that took the lead in bringing relief to those who found themselves among the least of these during the conception of this movement. Those who were proponents of the social Gospel movement based their beliefs on liberation theology. As the church took the lead in such matters, God used His people to display unconditional biblical love to the surrounding community. Richard Jackson, in his work, describes it by way of the poetic muses flowing through his veins. "I feel suddenly liberated because Love has ripped the maps from the walls of my brain and because Despair no longer holds me like a rabbit in its teeth."[2] It is indeed the love that the church shows by way of the social Gospel movement, informed by a liberation theology movement, that emancipates a

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[1] James D. Kirylo, "Chapter Seven: Liberation Theology and Paulo Freire," *Counterpoints* 385 (2011): 167–193, http://www.jstor.org/stable/42980929.

[2] Richard Jackson, "Liberation Theology," *Prairie Schooner* 75, no. 1 (2001): 73–75, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40637236.

community from the teeth of poverty and oppression. Liberation theology is a theology of love in action.

Theological Study and Theme

The Ethic of Love

The passion and concern of rural black congregations for the plight of the community is driven by liberation theology. Current chaos in the community should inspire the black church, just as did James Cone in the early summer of 1968. According to David L. Clough:

> James H. Cone died in April 2018, almost exactly fifty years after he sat down to write Black Theology and Black Power in the early summer of 1968. Cone wrote the book in the aftermath of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., angry at white ministers who condemned Black violence in the riots that followed in major US cities while remaining silent about the white violence inflicted on Black people.[3]

The anger of James Cone highlights just how polarized the white church and black church can be when it comes to speaking up and speaking out against social injustice.

This same anger permeated the Black Church with the senseless killing of George Floyd. Where there is anger, there will also be polarization. White churches held Blue Lives Matter Marches and Black Churches held Black Lives Matter Marches. Yohana Arga Junker argues that COVID-19 not only affected the black community physically, but there was a negative impact socially and politically.

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[4] Paul Dafydd Jones and Kait Dugan, eds., *Karl Barth and Liberation Theology* (London, UK: Bloomsbury T and T Clark, 2021), https://doi.org/10.5040/9780567698797?locatt=label:secondary_bloomsburyCollections.

> Instead of functioning as an "opportunity" to reevaluate and mend the brokenness these injustices have caused, the virus has unmasked how countries are failing to protect their citizens while further militarizing and closing borders, allowing "entrepreneurs to capitalize on global suffering," exploit the vulnerable, continue to kill, and "find ways to reproduce and strengthen their powers within a pandemic zone." [4]

When the church engages in liberation theology that is based upon a biblical mandate, both liberals and conservatives, the white church and black church, will not ignore what the pandemic exposed, but will be moved to do something about it because of the ethic of love.

James Cone's anger was motivated by love for his community, and both the white church and black church, the conservative and the liberal, must be filled with healthy divine indignation that motivates them to be change agents by way of love. Liberation theology is a theology rooted and grounded in love. Cone's beliefs about black theology were born out of the tenets of liberation theology. Those who engage in racism and discrimination can not embrace the Christian ethic of love. J. Deotis Roberts, Jr. would argue that black theology and ethics cannot be divorced from one another.

> Black theology and ethics are closely linked one with the other. This is due to the fact that racism, which is the occasion for direction of theology and ethics, is at once a moral and theological problem. This link would hold even if our concern were only an anti-white reaction to oppression. This is the negative pole of black theological ethics. Racism, however, is not only a moral problem; it is theological as well. A strong case for this position has been presented by Waldo Beach (1957) and George D. Kelsey (1965). Kelsey's work makes a solid case for the theological basis for racial concern and presents one of the finest statements on Christian anthropology by any black scholar thus far. This is true even if Kelsey was not "thinking black." The liberation-from-oppression thrust of James Cone

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[4] Yohana Agra Junker, "On Covid-19, U.S. Uprisings, and Black Lives: A Mandate to Regenerate All Our Relations," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 36, no. 2 (2020): 117–118, https://doi.org/10.2979/jfemistudreli.36.2.09.

> clearly points in the direction of the interdependence of faith and ethics in black theology.[5]

Roberts argues that liberation theology is not about "thinking black," but it is, in essence, about "thinking love." Love is a universal truth that has a theological basis that both conservatives and liberals in the body of Christ cannot argue against. Faith and ethics hang on the Christian ethic of love through the teachings and actions of Jesus in the scriptures. Both Cone and conservatives would have to agree that Jesus is the epitome of love. Love originates with Jesus! "For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life" (Jn. 3:16, NIV). Jesus initiates love! "We love because He first loved us" (1 Jn. 4:19, NIV). Jesus demonstrates love! "But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8, NIV). Jesus mandates love! "And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (Mt. 22:39, NIV).

Evangelicals and conservatives who try to paint liberation theology as a heresy argue against their own theology of an ethic of love. Henlee H. Barnette suggests that Christian ethics cannot be divorced from the ethic of love. "Christian love, for example, may mean both self-love and selfless love; wholly selfless love; the bifurcation of love into sacrificial and mutual love; solely neighbor love and/ or community love."[6] Furthermore, Henlee argues that evangelicals and conservatives adhere to an ethic of love because of the ethics of obedience. "Deontological ethics is an ethics of obedience. Theologians who follow this method are more concerned with the demand of God than

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[5] J. Deotis Roberts, "Black Theological Ethics: A Bibliographical Essay," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 3, no. 1 (1975): 69, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40017719.

[6] Barnette H. Henlee, *Introducing Christian Ethics* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1978), 5.

the goal of man in ethics."[7] Henlee, who is conservative and evangelical, also argues for radical obedience when it comes to the ethic of love. "The latter tend to reduce the revealed ethical commands to the love of God and neighbor to which God demands radical obedience."[8]

The radical nature of this obedience to the love ethic is manifested in the prophetic voice of the Old Testament prophets. Such was the case of James Cone when he spoke out against the silence of white pastors as it concerned the death of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Any conservative or evangelical that refuses to speak out against injustice or work to rid the community of social plagues deny the prophetic voice of the Old Testament. The prophetic voice is not just meant to interpret the past or forecast the future, but the prophetic voice is also meant to liberate people from their current deplorable conditions. Henlee believes that this is what the prophets of the Old Testament engaged in as they sounded the trumpet of the prophetic voice.

> Wealth had concentrated rapidly into the hands of the few. Greedy landowners oppressed and impoverished the masses. Courts were corrupt and the judges welcomed bribes; drunkenness was widespread among both men and women. Both capital cities, Samaria and Jerusalem, were shockingly corrupt. Rulers lived in luxury and were insensitive to the plight of the people (Amos 6:1-6). Against this background the Hebrew prophets arose to speak with judgment and hope.[9]

Today, both conservative and liberal white and black pastors have a biblical mandate to rise and use the prophetic voice to give the people a message of judgment and hope. The ethic of love brings about synergy with liberation theology, which is totally based on Jesus' teachings and actions.

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[7] Henlee, *Introducing Christian Ethics,* 5.

[8] Henlee, *Introducing Christian Ethics,* 5.

[9] Henlee, *Introducing Christian Ethics,* 27.

The Bias Toward the Bottom

"Black theological ethics is preoccupied with liberation. It is concerned about meaning, survival and protest for a people despised and degraded."[10] Roberts believes that God is truly the liberator of His people, and this concept is taught all throughout the Hebrew scriptures. "Black religion, from its African antecedents, has had a holistic understanding of man and salvation much like that of the biblical Hebrews."[11] Black people compare their experience with slavery to that of the Hebrew people in the Bible. White evangelicals cannot deny God being a liberator and lifter of the enslaved Hebrews of the Old Testament. In that great theophany of Exodus chapter three, it is undeniable to both conservatives and liberals that God is the God of liberation theology. God manifests His presence and power when those at the bottom are in trouble. God shows up when His people are being treated unfairly! God shows up when His people are discriminated against! God shows up when His people are being oppressed! "The Lord said, 'I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So, I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey" (Ex. 3:7-8a, NIV). Joel S. Baden argues that liberation theology was born from the teachings of the biblical narrative in the Book of Exodus. "Liberation theology begins with a radical rereading of the Bible— at least, one that was radical at the time, though its arguments have now so suffused discourse about the Bible that it can seem almost obvious. The fundamental

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[10] J. Deotis Roberts, "Black Theological Ethics: A Bibliographical Essay," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 3, no. 1 (1975): 70, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40017719.

[11] Roberts, "Black Theological Ethics: A Bibliographical Essay," 70.

claim— that the Bible, and the God of the Bible, stands on the side of the poor and oppressed— is a bold challenge, not to Christian faith but to the structures and systems of power that promote Christian faith."[12] Many white evangelicals miss the liberation theology found in Exodus because they read the scriptures through a purely political lens. Such is the case of MAGA Republicans who support former President Donald Trump's agenda that ignores, overlooks, and degrades those who are at the bottom of society. The scriptures that were once held in high esteem by evangelicals and white conservatives are not held as high when it speak to helping the least of these. A radical rereading of scripture under the Holy Spirit's influence and not their political ideologies would reveal to them the error of their ways.

For true synergy to take place, a radical rereading of scripture must also be done by blacks and liberals within the Christian ranks. The God who liberates in Exodus is also the God who gives Moses, the leader of the liberated people, the Decalogue. God who liberates from social issues also liberates from the plague and sickness of sin. Moral integrity and ethics cannot be sacrificed for the sake of social liberation. God is so vast and great that He can simultaneously liberate human beings from sin and social issues.

The radical rereading of scripture is also a challenge to the black church to forsake the tenets of the prosperity Gospel and get back to the Gospel that liberates and looks out for the least of these. Jesus says, "For I was hungry, and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger, and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me" (Mt. 25:35-36, NIV).

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[12] Joel S. Baden, "Liberation Theology," in *The Book of Exodus: A Biography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), 187-188, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvc773s1.11.

"Liberation theology speaks about God operating at the margins, rather than the center, and advocating for the marginal, rather than reinforcing the authority of the powerful."[13] God who operates in the White House will also operate in the outhouse. God, who loves families in gated communities, also loves those families who live in the housing developments and ghettos of America, just as He loved the Hebrews living in the Goshen Ghettos of Exodus. God's bias toward the bottom is not limited to the Book of Exodus, but it can be seen in the whole of scripture in both the Old and New Testaments. "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Tm. 3:16, NIV). Scripture teaches the believer to love their neighbor! Scripture rebukes the believer who does not care about the economic and social plight of others! Scripture corrects the sin of indifference to the poor! Scripture trains us to show compassion by way of liberation theology! Baden puts it this way:

> Rather than merely finding support for the poor in scriptural passages, it asserts that the overarching message of the text, from creation through the New Testament, is a declaration of opposition to poverty and social inequality. Poverty, as Gutiérrez defines it, is equivalent to death; the God of the Bible is the God of life. Poverty is thus an affront to God's will, and a challenge to divine sovereignty. Moreover, liberation theology holds that God not only defends the downtrodden but is actively on their side— what Gutiérrez termed the "preferential option for the poor," a phrase that has since entered the papal lexicon.[14]

The Shifting of Religious Structures

Liberation theology, based upon scripture, shifts the culture within religious structures.

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[13] Baden, "Liberation Theology," 188.

[14] Baden, "Liberation Theology," 188.

> As a call not only for a new understanding of the Bible but also for practical social and political action and a reorganization of ecclesiastical structures, liberation theology has, over the past fifty years, become the dominant theological position for Christian theologians in Latin America. It has expanded to serve the needs of many other communities, not least that of black theologians and of the black church in the United States.[15]

What began in Latin American Catholic churches has spread like wildfire into the hearts of black congregations and the minds of black theologians in America. Black congregations have been intentional about not limiting themselves to charity but engaging in social justice.

Danielle L. Ayers and Reginald Williams, Jr. argue that the church must be on the frontlines when it comes to social justice. "Justice seeks right systematic relationships from the get-go. That is, 'social justice focuses on basic causes of oppression, inequity, and disenfranchisement. It seeks to change public policy and public priorities."[16] When black congregations shift or transform their structure to deal with systemic causes of oppression, inequity, and disenfranchisement, the community and the church are blessed. The shift takes place when congregations are intentional about social justice. It requires black congregations of the twenty-first century who desire to embrace more mainline liberation theology to be relevant, flexible, and open when it comes to ministry. Jesus put this way in a parable that He put forth to religious leaders of the first century. "No one tears a piece out of a new garment to patch an old one. Otherwise, they will have torn the new garment, and the patch from the new one will not match the old. And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the new wine will burst the skins; the wine will

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[15] Baden, "Liberation Theology," 188-189.

[16] Danielle Ayers and Reginald Williams, *To Serve This Present Age: Social Justice Ministries in the Black Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2018), 5.

run out, and the wineskins will be ruined" (Lk. 5:36-37, NIV). Earlier in this pericope found in Luke chapter five, Jesus in those narratives challenges the religious structure to shift by launching out into the deep, looking for innovative ways to connect people to Jesus, and loving the lost at any cost. In so many words, Jesus was challenging the religious community to shift its structure to be proactive in meeting the needs of the community. Ayers and Williams says, "Where charity is reactive to specific material needs, justice is more proactive, working for changes in systems that create such needs."[17] Religious structures shift when the church is proactive in creating vehicles, such as non-profits to foster community development to bring about generational change.

The fire has spread from Latin America to the black church in America, but will or has the fire spread to white evangelical conservative churches in America? "The real-world application of theological principles— is central to liberation theology. In *A Theology of Liberation,* Gutiérrez seeks to bring traditional Christian theology down from the conceptual clouds and into the realm of the lived life."[18] Have evangelicals and conservatives embraced that God is not the God of the sweet by and by, but He is the God of today that brings liberation to the oppressed and marginalized? Are they willing to shift their congregational and denominational structures to serve the least of these? Mae-Ae Kim presents a logical argument for why evangelicals and conservatives may be hesitant or afraid to embrace liberation theology. "Liberation Theology attracted passionate adherents in Latin America and abroad who praised the movement's boldness.

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[17] Ayers and Williams, *To Serve This Present Age,* 5.

[18] Joel S. Baden, "Liberation Theology," in *The Book of Exodus: A Biography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), 189, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvc773s1.11.

Others framed Liberation Theology primarily in the context of Cold War concerns and U.S. foreign policy interests and criticized the movement as a mere front for the expansion of Communism into the Americas."[19] This fact was highlighted in a report given by the Directorate of Intelligence of the CIA with a deep critical analysis of the impact of liberation theology in Latin America, Asian, and South African Communities.

> Liberation theology is translated into social action through the popular church and its organizational component Christian Base Communities. The popular church provides an ideology embodied in liberation theology, an institutional mechanism, in the form of Christian base communities, and resources in the form of mass support. Christian base communities function primarily as devotional groups, although some have used the Gospel message to critique current political socio-economic conditions and to pursue local development projects. Base communities are set up as parallel institutions to government and church structures to create civic responsibility and provide services. In some cases, this arrangement has served to weaken government and official church authority. Many restrict their political role to human rights monitoring, organizing labor protests, establishing cooperatives and credit unions, providing healthcare and education, fundraising, supporting solidarity campaigns, publishing and other reform activities. Proponents of liberation theology usually only have a vague notion of the political model they espouse, and in our view their lack of a pragmatic socioeconomic plan often is exploited by radicals bent on bringing Marxist-style government to power.[20]

However, the death of George Floyd caused many evangelical and conservative Christians to take a fresh look at the need for social justice and liberation theology. James Cone argues that the heritage and struggle of blacks help us take a fresh look at the Good News of Jesus Christ. "It was the "African" side of black religion that helped African Americans to see beyond the white distortions of the Gospel and to discover its true

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[19] Mee-Ae Kim, "Liberation and Theology: A Pedagogical Challenge," *The History Teacher* 46, no. 4 (2013): 601, http://www.jstor.org/stable/43264161.

[20] https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP97R00694R000600050001-9pdf.

meaning as God's liberation of the oppressed from bondage."[21] When white evangelical and conservative Christians begin to see that the Word of God cannot be detached or divorced from a people's heritage and struggle, then they will truly see that there can be synergy between liberals and conservatives as it concerns liberation theology. The inerrancy of scripture is rooted and grounded in God's divinely inspired word that was given to men to write in their own context and amid their own struggles in life. "Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation of things. For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pt. 1:20-21, NIV). They were human beings living in the oppressive world of the Roman government.

During Apartheid in South Africa, there was a group of evangelicals that saw the light. As they witnessed the destruction and chaos of their community, they realized that they had a divine mandate to be socially conscious and engage in liberation theology. They called themselves the Conscious Evangelicals. "Our frustration was that our own churches, groups, or organizations were almost lost and could not provide prophetic light in the situation. At the worst, most would be supporting the status quo instead of being a conscience to the state."[22] The Conscious Evangelicals understood that they had to go beyond the basics and go beyond the norm for them to be used as vessels to bring healing to the community. Therefore, they decided to critique their theology. It was time for the

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[21] James H. Cone, "Black Theology in American Religion," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 53, no. 4 (1985): 755–756, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1464274.

[22] Concerned Evangelicals, "Evangelicals Critique Their Own Theology and Practice," *Transformation* 4, no. 1 (1987): 17, http://www.jstor.org/stable/43052184.

Conscious Evangelicals to stop looking in a microscope at the issues plaguing the community and start looking in a mirror at themselves.

> (1) The area of basic theological problems like evangelical conservatism, dogmatism, dualism, reconciliation, justice and peace,
> (2) The theology of the status quo: that is, the theology which is used to support and maintain existing systems in the world,
> (3) Oppressive structures of evangelical churches and organizations and their tendency to conform or take the form of the world around them, even when this compromises the very Gospel of the Lord,
> (4) Conservative church groups across all the churches in South Africa which claim to be evangelicals,
> (5) The lack of ecumenism, that is, inter-fellowship and co-operation even among evangelicals,
> (6) The interests, motives and the theology of mission and evangelism of evangelistic groups both locally and internationally as a characteristic of evangelicalism,
> (7) The radical demands of the Gospel as opposed to the conservative tendencies of evangelical groups.[23]

Evangelical Christians in America, just as evangelical Christians in South Africa, must have a moment of self-reflection and introspection to examine how the church has gotten off course as it concerns ministering to the least of these. Instead of supporting the status quo worldly systems that fill pockets with money, the church must sincerely support God-ordained systems that uplift all of humanity. There must also be an intentional effort by evangelical churches and non-evangelical churches, white and black churches, to engage in partnership and fellowship for the advancement of the kingdom. Embracing, accepting, and acting upon the radical demands of the Gospel to bring about a shift in religious structures requires recommitment to the teachings of scripture. It requires the courage to speak truth to power as the prophetic Elijah did to challenge the current power structures of society. “Now Elijah the Tishbite, from Tishbe in Gilead, said

[23] Concerned Evangelicals, “Evangelicals Critique Their Own Theology and Practice,” 18.

to Ahab, As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word" (1 Kgs. 17:1, NIV). Will evangelicals continue to condone the hate, racism, and xenophobia of Donald Trump, or will they engage in biblical mainstream liberation theology and speak to him what thus said the Lord?

The church must prioritize transformation into the likeness and image of Jesus Christ over assimilation to ungodly worldly systems. Will evangelical Christians choose to conform or be transformed? "Do not conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is His good, pleasing, and perfect will" (Rom. 12:2, NIV). For there to be a shift in religious structure then the will of God must be placed above the will of man. Jesus put it this way in the Garden of Gethsemane, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done" (Lk. 22:42, NIV).

The Synergy of Two Worlds

Just as there are those who are evangelical and conservative who would argue against the acceptance of liberation theology, there are those who are liberal, black, and Afrocentric who argue against accepting the tenets of Eurocentric Christianity. There are also black churches that are more evangelical or conservative and reject the ideology of Afrocentrism. According to Adam Clark, "Some Black churches argue that Afrocentricity is a hostile diversion from faith in Jesus Christ. Afro centrists, in the main, claim that

Christianity is irredeemably Eurocentric; it stunts the development of people of African descent."[24] Does one have to recant or disavow their blackness to be an authentic Christian? Does one have to denounce Eurocentric Christianity to be black? Such is not the case. Clark argues that no one must make a choice between the two because there is middle ground. There indeed can be synergy between Afrocentrism and Eurocentric Christianity. Clark says, "I argue for a concept of double belonging; one can be nurtured by and belong to African and Christian traditions at the same time."[25]

Clark's argument is correct because the hypostatic union of scripture teaches us that one can be two things at the same time. Jesus was God and man at the same time. Jesus was fully human and fully divine simultaneously. Both John and Paul, in their writings, highlight the hypostatic union. John declares, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (Jn. 1:14, NIV). Paul declares in that great Christological hymn of the early church, "Who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to His own advantage; rather, He made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness" (Phi. 2:6-7, NIV). If Jesus can be God and man at the same time, then one can indeed be black/Afrocentric and Christian at the same time. God, who creates and downloads into man the Imago Dei is the same God who redeems man through the blood of Jesus Christ. Blackness and Christianity can be in concord and agreement with one another. Both can

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[24] Adam Clark, "Honoring the Ancestors: Toward an Afrocentric Theology of Liberation," *Journal of Black Studies* 44, no. 4 (2013): 376, http://www.jstor.org/stable/24572935.

[25] Clark, "Honoring the Ancestors," 376.

be used to give glory to God and uplift humanity socially as well as spiritually. Clark would argue that being black or Afrocentric informs our prophetic voice to speak out against and move into action to heal the injustices of society. He highlights many Christian Afrocentric pastors and leaders who were the volcanic eruption for social justice because of the synergy of these two worlds. "Jeremiah Wright's African-centered orientation to Christian faith fits into a long tradition of freedom fighters such as Edward Wilmont Blyden, Maria Stewart, Bishop Henry McNeal Turner, and Marcus Garvey. These thinkers used African-centered thinking to reshape Christianity into an instrument of racial uplift."[26] Christian leaders must continue to allow who they are as human beings and the struggle that they have gone through as a people to shape how they live out their Christian faith. What is in the head and the heart will have a direct correlation to what one does with their hands for the glory of God.

Doctor of Ministry Project

The Doctor of Ministry Project is birthed from the seed of liberation theology. Christians who embrace the tenets of liberation theology are moved to be change agents in society. There is nothing heretical about Christians using every resource available to them for the uplifting of humanity and community. Therefore, both liberals and conservatives, whites and blacks, should hurry to the middle ground of a mainstream biblically based liberation theology. It is a theology that uplifts humanity and the community both socially and spiritually. It is a theology that centers on social and spiritual change occurring simultaneously.

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[26] Clark, "Honoring the Ancestors," 377.

The spiritual and social changes that occur by way of liberation theology speak directly to the problem statement and thesis of the Doctor of Ministry Project. Churches of all sizes, ethnicities, demographics, denominational backgrounds, and geographic locations face financial instability within and around them. The economic plight of rural congregations and their communities increased drastically due to the impacts of inflation, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the hostile political climate that permeates the United States of America. If a model is developed for congregations to develop non-profits, then access to the tools necessary for community development and partnerships can be leveraged to alleviate chronic poverty.

Developing non-profits and giving churches and leaders access to tools to engage in community development is essential to liberating those marginalized, oppressed, and overlooked in minority communities. When examining the ministry and life of Jesus, the effects of liberation theology become apparent. Jesus, by meeting the social, emotional, financial, and material needs of the people, opened the door to minister to their spiritual needs. The church does not have to choose one or the other, but the church, by way of mainline biblical liberation theology, allows both conservatives and liberals to meet the needs of the people.

CHAPTER FIVE

INTERDISCIPLINARY FOUNDATION

Introduction

In the banking world, there are three categories of banks. The three categories of banks are community, regional, and commercial. What distinguishes the three different genres of banking institutions? According to Matt Hanauer, Brent Lytle, Chris Summers, and Stephanie Ziadeh, "We define a community bank with less than $10 billion in total assets. Conversely, we define a non-community bank as a commercial bank with $10 billion or more in total assets."[1] Research suggests that community banks with assets lower than $10 billion are most likely to have a significant impact on their communities. "Although community banks have no universal definition, they are often described by two characteristics: their small size and their focus on the communities in which they are located."[2]

One of the community partners needed for non-profits engaging in community development to be successful is banking institutions. The relationship with a banking institution is valuable because of the bank's resources available to assist the non-profit in

[1] Matt Hanauer, Brent Lytle, Chris Summers, and Stephanie Ziadeh, "Community Banks' Ongoing Role in the U.S. Economy," *Economic Review* 106, no. 2 (June 2021): 38.

[2] Hanauer, Lytle, Summers, Ziadeh, "Community Banks' Ongoing Role in the U.S. Economy," 38.

uplifting the community. Banks also have a model for helping underserved and underprivileged communities. The model is more prevalent in community banks versus commercial banks as it concerns engaging in community development. According to Greg Andranovich, Ali Modarres, and Gerry Riposa:

> We examine the Los Angeles Community Development Bank to glean further lessons regarding the role community banks can play in community development. Among the lessons from this experience are that politics are inescapable in the design of the community banks; the economics of banking tends to undervalue community needs; and cultural factors include both professional and community-level challenges. Accounting for these factors can help community banks empower communities to meet the challenges of eliminating poverty.[3]

Community reinvestment money and federal money banks are required by law to reinvest in the community, which can fuel economic empowerment to eliminate poverty. The bank has a federal mandate to reinvest, but the church has a biblical mandate to reinvest in the community to bring about holistic change. Therefore, relationships and partnerships affect the overall success or failure of the local or community bank. Eugene Nelson White suggests that these relationships go back to the Civil War in the United States. "The evolution of banking regulation from the Civil War to the Great Depression is analyzed by examining the actions of the three interested parties: the banks, the public, and the government regulators."[4] How far does the relationship between the church or God's people go back when it concerns financing or investing in projects in the community? The relationship goes back to the return of the exiles from Babylon.

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[3] Greg Andranovich, Ali Modarres, and Gerry Riposa, "Community Banking and Economic Development: Lessons from Los Angeles," *Community Development Journal* 42, no. 2 (2007): 194–205, http://www.jstor.org/stable/44259042.

[4] Eugene Nelson White, "The Political Economy of Banking Regulation, 1864-1933," *The Journal of Economic History* 42, no. 1 (1982): 33–40, http://www.jstor.org/stable/2120492.

Leaders such as Ezra and Nehemiah were dependent upon the resources of the leaders of Persia, who were willing to reinvest in their communities. The integration of churches reinvesting in their communities by way of non-profits and community banks reinvesting in their communities can be viewed from the perspective of the proposal of this project, biblical, historical, and theological foundations.

Project Problem

In the banking world, there are two types of banks: community banks and commercial banks. Community banks are tied to their communities. They are local and have the interest of the community at heart. Community banks are based on relationships. "Despite their declining market share community banks remain crucial providers of credit and financial services in the United States. Community banks are the predominant providers of banking services in rural communities across the country and play a vital role in sustaining their local communities."[5] Commercial banks are about big business and are shackled by many federal regulations. There is indeed a correlation between the church and the community bank. The correlation is the church builds relationships and is also tied to the community where it is located. Like banks, the church must decide whether it will be tied to the community or commercialism. The church must indeed be tied to the community because of the community-mindedness of Jesus in the Gospels and the Apostles in the Book of Acts. In a sense, Jesus was a non-profit of His own. He ministered to the marginalized and impoverished of the community. Jesus' inaugural message in the synagogue revealed His focus on community, "The Spirit of the Lord is on

[5] Hanauer, Lytle, Summers, and Ziadeh, "Community Banks' Ongoing Role in the U.S.," 37.

me, because He has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Lk. 4:18-19, NIV). The Apostles in the Book of Acts focused on the community because the mandate of the commission given by Jesus was for them to begin sharing the Gospel and engaging in ministry in their community. "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

The church, through non-profits, must seek to build relationships with the community and reinvest in the community to bring about lasting change by rebuilding the ruins and repairing the breaches in the walls. Churches can model community banks because the success of community banks is due to the development of lasting relationships. "Community banks have traditionally been known as 'relationship bankers.' By establishing longer-term relationships with customer, community banks can obtain information not readily available through more standardized means, providing them advantages in lending to small or newly formed businesses that make lack extensive credit history."[6]

The biblical model for church growth is also based on relationships. Non-profits provide an avenue for churches to develop meaningful relationships with the community while also alleviating poverty. Paul, in that epistle of joy to the church at Philippi, highlights the holiness and necessity of meaningful relationships. "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not

[6] Hanauer, Lytle, Summers, Ziadeh, "Community Banks' Ongoing Role in the U.S.," 39.

looking to your interests but each of you to the interests of the others" (Phil. 2:3-4, NIV). The epitome of joy for the church is positioning herself as the bride of Christ to minister to the community by placing the needs of the community above her own.

Not only are communities suffering from poverty and the need for banks, but more than anything else, they need the church. Both the church and banks were needed during and after COVID-19. Churches of all sizes, ethnicities, demographics, denominational backgrounds, and geographic locations face financial instability within and around them. The economic plight of rural congregations and their communities increased drastically due to the impacts of inflation, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the hostile political climate that permeates the United States of America. The church stepped up to minister to the least of these, as well as the banking industry. Churches were busy fulfilling those prophetic words spoken by Jesus in Matthew chapter twenty-five. "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me" (Matt. 25:35-36, NIV). Community banks were also key in helping communities navigate these difficult seasons. "In particular, community banks are outsized providers of credit to agricultural and commercial borrowers, including during periods of economic stress-as demonstrated by the relative stability of small banks' business lending during the global financial crisis, and the significant role they played in intermediating emergency relief funds during the Covid-19 pandemic."[7] A small family-owned bank in Nebraska led the way during COVID-19 as it was concerned with helping its community navigate the

[7] Hanauer, Lytle, Summers, Ziadeh, "Community Banks' Ongoing Role in the U.S.," 37.

Paycheck Protection Program. According to Ryan Whalen and Renae Merle, "Some large banks were slow to start lending, while others left applicants hanging without funding for weeks. Small businesses in some regions had trouble finding a lender, even as large restaurant chains managed to get loans."[8] Churches like small businesses that banked with commercial banks were ignored and overlooked when looking for PPP Loan assistance. Local small community banks stepped up and showed out. "One bright spot emerged; small businesses say: local banks hustled to disburse loans to their communities as fast they could. They did this by planning round-the-clock, shifting hundreds of employees to the effort, and cranking out approvals as soon as the program opened, even as the government was still clarifying the rules."[9] When government and big business fail the community, the church has an obligation, just as the community banks, to step up and fill the void by creating non-profits to combat poverty. The project will give churches access to the tools to create non-profits to combat poverty, just as the community bank.

Biblical Foundation

The biblical foundation scripture for the project is Isaiah 58:12. The context and setting of the passage are the return of the exiles from Babylon. The returning exiles find very deplorable conditions in their community. Isaiah declares, "Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise the age-old foundations; you will be called the Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings" (Is. 58:12). The returning exiles would

[8] Renae Merle and Jeanne Whalen, "How a Family-Owned Nebraska Bank Became a Leader on Coronavirus Loans," Washington Post, April 22, 2021, 1.

[9] Merle and Whalen, "How a Family-Owned Nebraska Bank Became a Leader," 1.

be responsible for finding creative and innovative ways to restore and rebuild their communities. The mission of the exiles in Isaiah 58:12 aligns with the mission of the church when creating non-profits and with that of community banks that reinvest in the community to restore and rebuild impoverished communities. The community bank is part of the remnant that has been left to fulfill the God-given role as repairers of the breach. Just like the returning exiles of Isaiah 58:12, the community banks have been strategically positioned for such a time as this.

Margaret Hanrahan and Angela Hinton argue that the location, specialty, and size of community banks allowed them to rebuild and repair communities before, during, and after COVID-19. "Despite their relatively small size and share of banking industry assets, community banks have consistently demonstrated an ability to serve their customers. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, community banks held an outsized share of small business loans."[10] Community banks provide a model for churches, despite their size or assets, to be able to make a difference in their communities. A church can create a nonprofit that opens doors to other significant streams of income to repair and rebuild the community. The returning exiles in Isaiah 58:12, even though they may have been small assets, made a difference. A thorough investigation of scripture shows that God can use small things to do great things. "Who dares despise the day of small things, since the seven eyes of the LORD that range throughout the earth will rejoice when they see the chosen capstone in the hand of Zerubbabel" (Zec. 4:10)? Small things can indeed become great things! The church, like community banks, must be willing to start somewhere.

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[10] Magaret Hanrahan and Angela Hinton, "The Importance of Community Banks in Paycheck Protection Program Lending," *FDIC Quarterly* 14 (2020): 31.

Community banks helping the community during the pandemic were also based on location. Research reveals that community banks held a higher percentage of PPP loans in rural and agricultural areas. "The share of PPP loans held by community banks in micropolitan areas (63 percent) and rural areas (84 percent) closely matches their share of total loans and C&I loans in those areas. Community banks in metropolitan areas, however, hold a higher share of PPP loans than other loans."[11] Whether it was a major city, an urban core with more than 10,000 people and less than 50,000 people, or a rural community with less than 10,000 people, the community banks were helping the hurting around them. In the same way, the church has a divine mandate to help the hurting around them, whether the community is metropolitan, micropolitan, or rural. The returning exiles of Isaiah 58:12 ignored a theme that resounds throughout scripture as it concerns God's people, uplifting the community where they reside. This principle was exemplified by the returning exiles and the early church. The exiles were freed from Babylonian captivity, and the early church was freed from the bondage of sin. "All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need" (Acts 2:44-45).

Lending also fell into specialized groups for the community banks that helped the hurting in rebuilding and restoring during and after COVID-19. "Commercial and agricultural specialty lenders were the most common participants in the PPP lending program, consistent with the most common borrowers in the program and the number of banks identified in these specialty groups."[12] The lenders rose to the occasion to help

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[11] Hanrahan and Hinton, "The Importance of Community Banks in Paycheck Protection," 34.

[12] Hanrahan and Hinton, "The Importance of Community Banks in Paycheck Protection," 36.

those struggling in the areas of commercial and agricultural because they were experts in their field. This is what gives the church an advantage in helping the community by creating non-profits as a vehicle for rebuilding and restoring the community. Helping people in times of need is what the body of Christ specializes in. The church is an expert at helping the least of these. When the church in Jerusalem was struggling, the Apostle Paul reached out to the church at Corinth to specialize in the field in which they were experts. Just as the Corinthian church was to model the Macedonian Church, the church today can model the community bank in restoring and rebuilding the community. "And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity" (2 Cor. 8:1-2).

There were those during the rebuilding and restoration of Jerusalem who thought the exiles would not be able to succeed as it concerned their mission. The exiles learned quickly that everyone would not be excited about God's people doing God's work in the community. According to Fensham, "In Ezra chapter 3 the beginning of the building activities is sketched, but the temple is not completed till twenty years later in the reign of Darius. In Ezra 4:1-5 the reason for this delay is given. The enemies of Judah and Benjamin."[13] The people's enemies revolted against them to stop the progress taking place in the community. The enemy of small banks when it concerns helping the community is the new regulations put in place by the government. Small community banks, due to government regulations, are disappearing. Once upon a time, commercial

[13] Charles F. Fensham, "The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah," *The New International Commentary of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1983), 65.

banks drew the focus and scrutiny of government regulations, but now the spotlight has shifted. According to Preston Ash, Christopher Koch, and Thomas F. Siems, "Much has been discussed and written about what to do about the so-called 'too-big-to-fail' banks and their role in the 2008-09 Great Recession. But now, more than five years after passage of legislation designed to create a new regulatory framework to promote financial stability and protect American consumers, smaller community banks are finding it increasingly tough to survive, due in part to the compliance costs needed to deal with the new regulations."[14] Does the new regulatory environment make it difficult for small community banks to succeed? The new regulatory environment makes it difficult for small community banks to survive because only one new bank has been born since the new regulations. "Notwithstanding the benefits community banks bring to the economy, practically no new banks have entered the market since 2008. In fact, since 2010, the U.S. has had only one de novo bank charter-an Amish-backed bank in Pennsylvania called Bank of Bird-in-hand."[15]

The banks find themselves in a new regulatory environment, but the church today finds itself in a new religious environment. It is a new religious environment that questions whether the church can succeed. Relationships are the key for small commercial banks to overcome a new regulatory environment and for the church to overcome a new religious environment. "Community banks are relationship lenders. Their comparative advantage is to know their customer, understand their markets and

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[14] Preston Ash, Christopher Koch, and Thomas F. Siems, "Too Small to Succeed? Community Banks in New Regulatory Environment," *Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas, Financial Insights* 4, no. 4 (2015): 1.

[15] Ash, Koch, and Siems, "Too Small to Succeed?" 2.

needs, and provide flexible services."[16] For the exiles to repair the breach and restore the community, they had to be fluid and flexible. They too, had to deal with a new regulatory and religious environment. "As soon as the copy of the letter of King Artaxerxes was read to Rehum and Shimshai the secretary and their associates, they went immediately to the Jews and compelled them by force to stop. Thus, the work on the house of God in Jerusalem came to a standstill until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia" (Ez. 4:23-24). Yet, they were innovative, creative, and faithful until the work or mission was completed. "So, the elders of the Jews continued to build and prosper under the preaching of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah, a descendant of Iddo. They finished building the temple according to the command of the God of Israel and the decrees of Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes, kings of Persia" (Ez. 6:14). Sooner or later, the regulatory and religious environment will shift for the church to move forward to rebuild and restore the community with the mandate of God coming through the decrees of the government.

Historical Foundation

According to Wendy J. Deichmann, "The social Gospel movement in the United States was a faith-based, grassroots movement of laity and clergy in the aftermath of the Civil War."[17] The movement being faith-based means the community of faith rose to the occasion to heal the social ills of society. Laity and clergy of congregations who were ordinary people were moved by God to do extraordinary things to enhance their

[16] Ash, Koch, and Siems, "Too Small to Succeed?" 3-4.

[17] Wendy J. Deichmann, "The Social Gospel as a Grassroots Movement," *Church History* 84, no. 1 (n.d.): 203.

communities. Change was not left in the sole hands of the clergy, but clergy and laity joined hand in hand to bring stability to an unstable nation. Deichmann says, "During this era, American society faced extreme levels of social instability resulting not only from wartime trauma and loss, but also relocation of massive numbers of those emancipated from slavery, a rapidly accelerated pace of both industrialization and urbanization, and unprecedented waves of immigration."[18] One cannot help but see the correlation between the clergy and the church rising during the conception of the social Gospel movement and community banks rising to combat the financial instability during and after COVID-19.

The social Gospel movement was advanced because of industrialization and urbanization, whereas the banking community, as well as the church today, has a mandate to minister to the social ills of society because of the rise of globalization and technology. According to Richard Brunskill, vice president of the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago, "The same technology advancements allowing community banks to generate more revenue are also allowing larger banks, credit unions, and fintech companies to compete more effectively in the traditional community bank space."[19] The technological advancements pose both a challenge and promise for the body of Christ. The challenge is that the communities that churches and community banks serve are often behind them as it concerns the digitalization of the world. Joshua Siegal states, "The two primary challenges facing the community banking industry are aging leadership teams and a lack

[18] Diechmann, "The Social Gospel as a Grassroots Movement," 203.

[19] Jeff Bonham, Paul Curtis-Wittenberg, Whitney Hanson, Pamela Kennedy, Robert Millerick, and Gregory Rensink, "Community Banking: A Time of Promise and Challenge," *Chicago Fed Letter*, no. 412 (2019): 1, https://doi.org/10.21033/cfl-2019-412.

of adaptability to an evolving technology environment."[20] Shockingly, those are the same two issues facing churches that desire to embrace the social Gospel movement. How can the church combat poverty and other social ills with older leadership in place and a large technological gap? The church, like the men of Issachar, finds itself having to adjust or shift to meet the needs of the present age. The Bible says concerning the men of Issachar, "from Issachar, men who understood the times and knew what Israel should do-200 chiefs should, with all their relatives under their command" (1 Chr. 12:32).

Developing non-profits to combat poverty and social ills is the church's understanding of the times and adapting. Siegal suggests that adapting and understanding the times helped community banks to survive and thrive. "Advances in technology are allowing community banks to deliver higher-quality services at lower costs. Flexible core banking systems could help banks to respond more quickly to changing market conditions with better capabilities and data, and automation could deliver greater productivity gains, reduced processing costs, higher quality service, and faster implementation of new processes."[21] Siegal refers to community banks with flexible core banking systems; however, the church has timeless and eternal core systems that cause it to survive and thrive.

What would be some of the timeless and eternal core systems of the church as it concerns the social Gospel movement? First, the core systems of the church as it concerns the social Gospel movement, would be the scriptures. The clergy and laity of the social Gospel movement, who worked tirelessly to lift humanity out of the pit of poverty, did

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[20] Bonham, Wittenberg, Hanson, Kennedy, Millerick, and Rensink, "Community Banking," 2.

[21] Bonham, Wittenberg, Hanson, Kennedy, Millerick, and Rensink, "Community Banking," 3.

not work in vain because the movement is rooted and grounded in scripture. Pierre Jacobs quotes Helder Camara, who said, "When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist."[22] Clergy who embraced the social Gospel movement of this error were in many ways considered to be those who practice eisegesis or, worse, heretics because many believed that the social Gospel movement was not based on the word of God. This is a lie straight from the deceitful mouth of the father of lies, the devil. There is indeed a scriptural mandate for the social Gospel. Second, a timeless and eternal core system for the church, as it concerns the social Gospel movement, is the character and nature of Jesus Christ. The Word teaches us that Jesus is the Word made flesh who revealed to humanity God's grace and truth. "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (Jn. 1:14). Paul, in his letter to the church at Rome, declares that Jesus reveals the righteousness of God. "For in the Gospel the righteousness of God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith'" (Rom. 1:17). The church exemplifies the character and nature of Jesus when it combats social ills in the community.

Theological Foundation

The integration of community banks and the theological foundation revolves around the ethic of love. Liberation theology is based upon love. The ethic of love in

[22] Pierre Jacobs, "The Social Gospel Movement Revisited: Consequences for the Church: Original Research," HTS: *Theological Studies* 71, no. 3 (2015): 1.

liberation theology is not spoken love but love in action. When the church and community banks lead in uplifting the community, they exemplify the love of Christ in action. Richard Jackson, in his work, describes it by way of the poetic muses flowing through his veins. "I feel suddenly liberated because Love has ripped the maps from the walls of my brain and because Despair no longer holds me like a rabbit in its teeth."[23] It is indeed the love that the church shows by way of the social Gospel movement informed by a liberation theology movement, that emancipates a community from the teeth of poverty and oppression.

One would not expect to find love at a bank. Where has the word love or the ethic of love ever been shown in the environment of a small community bank? At a community banking center, the word "love" will not show up, but the word "relationship" will manifest itself everywhere. Relationships have everything to do with love. Giorgia Barboni and Carlotta Rossi, in their article entitled "Does Your Neighbor Know You Better? The Supportive Role of Local Banks in the Financial Crisis," emphasized the importance of knowing your neighbor better in banking by way of relationships. Of course, Jesus, the true founder of not a liberal or conservative liberation theology but a biblical liberation theology, called this loving your neighbor as you love yourself. "This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (Mt. 22:38-39).

In community banks, it is not all about money, but it is about relationships that open the door for impoverished people and communities to have access to money to

[23] Richard Jackson, "Liberation Theology," *Prairie Schooner* 75, no. 1 (2001): 73–75, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40637236.

combat poverty. According to Giorgia Barboni and Carlotta Rossi, "Relationship lending allows local banks to collect private information about their customers to mitigate information asymmetries that often lead to credit rationing."[24] This private information that banks collect from customers by way of relationships prevents underprivileged people from being overlooked or discriminated against. Not overlooking the least of these is one of the basic tenets of liberation theology. The idea of having relationships or the ethic of love community banks during the pandemic did not take the position of some white evangelicals and conservatives who ignored the perpetual plight and oppression faced by blacks and other minorities in America. The community banks did the opposite of what Yohana Arga Junker argues. According to Junker, "Instead of functioning as an "opportunity" to reevaluate and mend the brokenness these injustices have caused, the virus has unmasked how countries are failing to protect their citizens while further militarizing and closing borders, allowing "entrepreneurs to capitalize on global suffering," exploit the vulnerable, continue to kill, and "find ways to reproduce and strengthen their powers within a pandemic zone."[25]

During the pandemic, community banks did not find ways to exploit the vulnerable, but they were intentional about finding ways to help and uplift the vulnerable during difficult times. Barboni and Rossi argue that because of relationships and soft information, "Local lenders supported their customers to a higher extent during bad

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[24] Giorgia Barboni and Carlotta Rossi, "Does Your Neighbor Know You Better? The Supportive Role of Local Banks in the Financial Crisis," *Journal of Banking and Finance* 106 (2019): 515.

[25] Yohana Agra Junker, "On Covid-19, U.S. Uprisings, and Black Lives: A Mandate to Regenerate All Our Relations," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 36, no. 2 (2020): 117–118, https://doi.org/10.2979/jfemistudreli.36.2.09.

times, at least in the period following immediately the outbreak of the financial crisis."[26] This fact not only played out in the aftermath of the financial crisis but also during COVID-19. Matt Hanauer, Brent Lytle, Chris Summers, and Stephanie Ziadeh states, "Community banks have also proven to be reliable providers of credit during times of economic stress, as evidenced by the relative stability of small bank business lending during the GFC and the key role that community banks played in providing emergency relief funds during the COVID-19 pandemic under the Small Business Administration's Paycheck Protection Program."[27]

The role community banks played in liberating people from poverty must also be considered. Community banks play a role in liberating people from predatory payday loan lenders, high credit card debt and interest rates, and lending discrimination when it comes to purchasing a home or starting a small business. Community banks reinvest in the communities where they are located, even when it lowers their profitability. According to W. Blake Marsh and Padma Sharma, "Overall, our results reveal that participation in the PPP program has grown community bank balance sheets at the expense of bank profitability, with low yields on PPP loans weighing down interest margins at PPP-concentrated banks."[28] They participated in the Paycheck Protection Program during the pandemic, even if it was detrimental to their balance sheet. They helped people even though they knew the loans would be forgiven. "First, as PPP loans

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[26] Giorgia Barboni and Carlotta Rossi, "Does Your Neighbor Know You Better? The Supportive Role of Local Banks in the Financial Crisis," *Journal of Banking and Finance* 106 (2019): 515.

[27] Matt Hanauer, Brent Lytle, Chris Summers, and Stephanie Ziadeh, "Community Banks' Ongoing Role in the U.S. Economy," *Economic Review* 106, no. 2 (June 2021): 39.

[28] W. Blake Marsh and Padma Sharma, "PPP Raised Community Bank Revenue But Lowered Profitability," *Economic Bulletin* (December 2020): 4.

become eligible for forgiveness, banks will need to identify alternative lending opportunities that are both sound and remunerative to generate revenue."[29] Finding an alternative for revenue instead of hurting the community proves that even in the world of community banking permeates the mindset of liberation theology.

Conclusion

There is indeed a direct correlation between the emphasis on the church being community-based and community banks being community-driven. Both sit at the center of the community to be change agents. Both the church and the community bank serve as salt, preventing the decay and staleness of poverty. "You are the salt of the earth, but if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot" (Mt. 5:13). Both the church and the community bank serve as a beacon light for those trying to escape the dark pit of poverty. "You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden" (Mt. 5:14). Therefore, by way of integration and partnership, both can be intentional when it comes to uplifting the community.

Both the church and the community bank, just as the returning exiles from Babylon, have a divine mandate to rebuild and repair what has been ruined and laid waste in the community. The blight and poverty experienced by the exiles returning from Babylonian captivity mirrors the blight in many rural communities. The spiritual apathy spoken out against in Isaiah chapter fifty-eight is still prevalent today among Christians,

[29] Marsh and Sharma, "PPP Raised Community Bank Revenue," 4.

which leads to financial, economic, and social ruin in our communities. The church and community banks can work together to alleviate the financial, economic, and social ruin.

Social justice is the avenue by which the local church and community bank, even in rural communities, can touch the lives of others. Touching the lives of others by providing the tools to repair broken walls and restore the streets of dwelling. The fight for social justice is the heart and soul of the social Gospel movement. Not only is it the heart of the social Gospel movement, but it is also the heart and soul of liberation theology. The ethic of love permeates both. It is the ethic of love that continues to motivate the church and community banks to love the least, the left out, the looked over, and the left behind of the community.

CHAPTER SIX

PROJECT ANALYSIS

Introduction

The purpose of this model that was developed was to provide small to mid-sized rural churches access to the tools needed to create non-profit organizations for the purpose of combating poverty. The information provided revealed to the churches who participated in the boot camp other resources outside of traditional tithes and offerings, which will enable them to engage in community development. This access and information were needed because many churches have not been able to tap into the plethora of resources available because they do not have non-profit organizations. By way of the six-week boot camp entitled "Thrive 360 Bootcamp: Empowering Small to Mid-sized Rural Churches to Combat Poverty" the participants gained access to lawyers, bankers, grant writers, city officials, and congregations that already have established non-profit organizations. The door was opened for these struggling congregations to uplift themselves and offer a helping hand to their communities through community development. The churches were able to see the value of a holistic approach to developing relationships between non-profits, for-profits, and public organizations.

By setting the biblical foundation of Isaiah 58:12, the participants were able to see that there is nothing heretical or sinful about churches creating non-profit organizations

to reach the lost and improve their communities. A correlation was made between today's church and the exiles returning from Babylonian captivity. Like the exiles who returned from Babylon to rebuild the ruins and repair the breaches developed relationships with the leaders of Persia, the churches were challenged to build relationships with non-profits, for-profits, and the public sector to alleviate poverty.

The biblical foundation was used as a model for community development. The participants were able to see the direct correlation between the returning exiles spiritual condition and the plight of the community. First, it was brought to fruition by setting the background and literary context of Isaiah. Next, we explored the historical context of the Jewish post Babylonian captivity through the eyes of the Nehemiah, Ezra, and Zechariah. We then examined what was going on socially during the time of the exiles return from captivity. Socially, it was indeed very dark, desperate, and depressing time for the community. Like today in America, inflation, poverty, and social unrest are at an all-time high. After closely examining the immediate context and undergoing a thorough exegesis of the passage, it was concluded that the passage indeed speaks to God's people having a divine mandate to be change agents in the community. For as the church goes as the epicenter of the community, then so goes the success or failure of the community.

The historical foundation that was established during the project was the Social Gospel Movement. Participants were challenged like the champions of the Social Gospel Movement to be moved with the compassion and love of Jesus to deal with the social illnesses found in their respective communities. The participants were able to see the correlation between the birth of the Social Gospel Movement after the American Civil War and the effects and aftermath of Covid-19 in America. Just as the American Civil

War and industrialization provided an opportunity for the church to do ministry in a different way so did Covid-19. The historical foundation afforded the opportunity for the participants to view community development through the Social Gospel Movement through the scriptures, the character and nature of Christ, and despite denominational affiliations.

The theological foundation for the project was liberation theology. Great effort was put into explaining the significance of liberation theology not being a liberal or conservative theology, but a theology rooted and grounded in the Bible. Participants were shown that liberation theology is biblical because it centered around the ethic love. Much emphasis was also placed on God not exclusively manifesting Himself as a lawgiver but also as liberator of His people in the Book of Exodus. During the session, it became crystal clear that God does indeed have a bias toward those at the bottom of the societal totem pole, which are the left out, looked over, left behind, and the least of these. Participants were also able to ponder upon the fact that liberation theology based upon the scriptures causes a cultural shift within religious structures. Finally, in the theological foundation of the project the participants learned that the teaching of scripture brings about synergy between the beliefs of conservatives and liberals concerning liberation theology.

The interdisciplinary foundation of the project was taken from the world of banking. The church in the community was compared to local community banks. Participants were able to see the correlation between churches reinvesting in their communities just as community banks reinvest in their communities. The churches were

shown the importance of the church being invested in the community because when Jesus' life is studied in the Gospels, He was invested and connected to the community.

Methodology

The "Thrive 360 Bootcamp: Empowering Small to Mid-sized Churches to Combat Poverty" was a model developed for local pastors and church leaders to participate in a six-session boot camp over six weeks. The boot camp gave them access to the tools needed to create a non-profit that engages in community development. The goal was to alleviate poverty and create opportunities for their congregations and community. The boot camp was hybrid, which allowed the participants to participate in person and virtually. Those who participated in person came to the Zion Traveler Baptist Church. Those who participated virtually logged in via Zoom.

Pastors and church leaders were invited to participate in the six-week boot camp called "Thrive 360 Boot Camp: Empowering Small to Mid-sized Churches to Combat Poverty." The invitation to attend the boot camp was sent out via social media on the Zion Traveler Baptist Church and Zion Traveler Community Development Corporation Facebook pages by way of a flyer being posted. Participants were selected on a first come and first serve basis. As a requirement participants had to be at least eighteen years or older. The participants also had to be a pastor or church leader affiliated with a small to mid-sized rural church. The announcement was posted four weeks ahead of the start date for the boot camp to give pastors and church leaders ample time to fill out the online registration from via JotForm. Once participants were selected, they were given the necessary consent forms to participate in the boot camp. It was made clear that

participation in the boot camp was based upon a voluntary basis. No money or compensation was given for participation in the bootcamp. Participants were also informed that they could leave the boot camp at any given time. The pastors and church leaders were also assured that great steps had been taken to keep all information submitted confidential. They were assured that I would be the only one able to identify who they were by way of the research and information submitted for the project. In the interest of confidentiality every church was given an identification number for data collection purposes.

A qualitative research method was utilized. The data collection methods for the "Thrive 360 Bootcamp: Empowering Small to Mid-sized Churches to Combat Poverty" were interviews, surveys, and journaling to test the hypothesis. Participants were also given pre- and post-assessments to determine the success or failure of the bootcamp. All data collected was collected digitally by way of JotForm. Each time the participants filled out an assessment, survey, or journal they entered their identification number to protect their identity and to ensure confidentiality during the boot camp.

First, church pre-assessments were given in session one of the bootcamp. Through the church assessments pastors and church leaders were able to assess their churches' needs, goals, and opportunities as it concerned community development. The assessments help gauge where a church was financially, numerically, demographically, socially, and spiritually. It was also through the assessments I was able to get an idea of the pastor and church leaders' expectations for the boot camp.

At the end of each session, participants filled out surveys concerning the effectiveness of the various presenters and topics. Participants were able to answer

questions about whether the session was effective, whether they learned anything from the session, and would the information they learned be helpful when it concerns creating a non-profit to combat poverty. The data for the surveys was also collected via JotForm.

Over a six-week period participants were asked to write a journal entry pertaining to the different sessions' content. This allowed the participants to be transparent and give more of their thoughts, feelings, and opinions concerning the topics covered during the boot camp sessions. The journal questions covered the biblical, historical, theological, and interdisciplinary foundations. The journal questions also covered the sessions on community banking, grant writing, legal, and partnerships.

Each church that participated also sat down for a one-on-one interview with me. It gave me an opportunity to engage the churches in a more personal way. The in-person interviews were good because it is often difficult to understand or get true context by way of a survey or journal entry via JotForm. I was able to hear their voices, concerns, and passion for uplifting and changing their communities through community development. Each church was scheduled a day and time for the pastors and church leaders to come in and sit down for the interview.

Another form of data collection was capturing video. Each session was captured via video recording. It provided me with an opportunity to be able to see the responses of the participants to questions and answers given during the question-and-answer period of the sessions. I was also able to see if the participants were engaged and listening to the different presenters who presented on the different topics at the boot camp. Finally, participants at the end of six weeks were given the opportunity to spend time with local

non-profits, for-profits, and public entities to see firsthand how they positively impact the communities in which they reside.

Security measures have been put in place to ensure safe storage and confidentiality of the data that was collected during the boot camp. The data collected from the pre- and post- assessments, surveys, journal entries, and video recordings are stored safely on my desktop in my office. The computer requires a code to access that only is known to the principal investigator. Furthermore, the data collected has been printed out and stored in a folder in a secure locked filing cabinet in the principal investigator's office. The data will be stored and secured for up to three years after I graduate from United Theological Seminary. After a period of three years, the data will then be disposed of in a proper manner. Using the qualitative research methodology, I was able to measure whether the boot camp clearly and decisively gave small to mid-sized congregations access to the tools needed to create non-profits to combat poverty.

Implementation

The "Thrive 360 Bootcamp: Empowering Small to Mid-sized Rural Churches to Combat Poverty" is totally grounded in the teachings of scripture. The scriptural basis for the bootcamp can be gleaned from the teachings of the Apostle Paul directed toward his son in ministry, Timothy. Paul wrote these words to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:3-4, "Join with me in suffering, like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No one serving as a soldier gets entangled in civilian affairs but rather tries to please his commanding officer." Just as it is the goal of the soldier to please his commanding officer it is also the goal of Christians and the church to please our commanding officer, Jesus Christ. Soldiers go through a

training period called bootcamp to be the best and most faithful soldier he or she can be. "No matter which branch of the service you choose, Bootcamp is an intense experience. The purpose of this training isn't to 'break' recruits. In fact, the combination of physical training, field exercises and classroom time makes individuals strong and capable.[1] The purpose of the "Thrive 360 Bootcamp" was not break churches but to build them up so they would be equipped to create non-profits to combat poverty in their respective communities.

Prior to the official start of the bootcamp, I had a planning and implementation meeting with my professional associates. They were informed that the "Thrive 360 Bootcamp: Empowering Small to Midsized Rural Churches to Combat Poverty" had all the required approval by United Theological Seminary to begin the bootcamp. An informal in-person meeting was also held with my context associates who assisted in the implementation of the project. My context associates assisted with the digital sign up, made sure all required documents, waivers, and confidentiality documents were signed, and other tasks that ensured the successful implementation of the project.

Week One

The "Thrive 360 Bootcamp: Empowering Small to Mid-sized Churches to Combat Poverty" began on Saturday, June 21, 2025. The time allotted for the bootcamp class sessions was from 10:00 a.m. -12:00 p.m. The in-person participants assembled at the Zion Traveler Baptist Church, which is located at 1201 Martin Luther King Drive in Ruston, Louisiana. The bootcamp classes were held in one of the classrooms of the

[1] "Today's Military," *Today's Military,* http://www.todaysmilitary.com.

church's Family Life Center. Virtual participants in the bootcamp signed in via Zoom by way of the link that was sent to them during the sign up and registration process. One of the contextual associates made sure that all participants in-person and virtually had signed the attendance roll for the bootcamp. We also ensured that all participants had received their personal identification number to make sure all information submitted would remain confidential. The session began with an opening word of prayer and gave each church, and pastor represented the opportunity to tell us a little about themselves and their ministry context. I also spent time outlining what the six weeks of the bootcamp would look like and the topics that would be covered.

One of the first objectives during this first session was to describe and define the purpose of the "Thrive 360 Bootcamp: Empowering Small to Mid-sized to Rural Churches to Combat Poverty." First, this was done by presenting my problem statement and hypothesis to the participants of the bootcamp. I emphasized to the participants how the rural churches across America, in the state of Louisiana, and especially in northern rural Louisiana were suffering because of inflation, Covid-19, and the political climate in America. Next, I spent time defining and explaining my hypothesis. I explain to them my rationality for developing a model for rural congregations to be given access to the tools to create a non-profit to combat poverty. I also explained how this bootcamp was born from the synergy of my Spiritual Autobiography and Ministry context research. The documents indicated that because I grew up in poverty and my ministry context is one of poverty that I am indeed passionate about combating poverty.

I then began teaching a lesson laying the biblical foundation for the bootcamp based upon Isaiah 58:12. I asked the participants to turn with me in their Bibles to Isaiah

58:12. There we read together the words of the prophet Isaiah, “Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age-old foundations; you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings.” I explained to the participants that to understand the true meaning of the text of Isaiah 58:12 we first had to place it in its proper context. We spent time in the lecture identifying the context of this passage as a moment in history when the Jewish people returned from Babylonian captivity. It was a time of both spiritual and physical ruin in the community. I highlighted that the community’s economic and social plight was connected to their spiritual plight. The people who returned from Babylonian captivity were fasting, but they were unconcerned about the least of these in the community. Like those who were the recipients of Isaiah writings, I emphasized that in many instances the church today has not grasped that there is no disconnect between the righteousness and justice of God. I asked the class to turn to Micah 6:8 NIV to drive this point home. We read the passage which says, “He has shown you, O moral, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Mi. 6:8, NIV).

I then set out to bridge the gap between this ancient writing of Isaiah and the divine mandate of the church to minister to the community. We thoroughly discussed how God always leaves a remnant to rebuild, rise, repair, and restore what lies in ruins. By doing a proper exegesis of the text I taught the biblical principles that enable the local church to be repairers of the breach and restorers of the streets. I challenged the participants to embrace the biblical principles to bring about healing in their broken communities, to create non-profits to repair their communities, and to partner with other organizations and entities to bring about change. We then engaged in a question-and-

answer period. The participants completed the surveys for that week, and we concluded with a word of prayer.

Week Two

Week two of the bootcamp was held on June 28, 2025, from 10:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m. at the Zion Traveler Baptist Church. The participants in-person signed in as well as participants who were on virtually via Zoom. The goal for the implementing of week two was for me to teach the historical and theological foundations for the project. After all participants had signed in for class and attendance was taken we opened with a word of prayer.

I began the lesson by introducing the founders of the Social Gospel Movement, Washington Gladden and Walter Raushenbusch. We discussed how Gladden was well known for synergizing Christian ethics and social issues. We then discussed how Rauschenbusch was known for emphasizing that the church could not afford to ignore social problems if we were going to bring about social changes. I then highlighted how those who embraced the social Gospel movement were like the men of Issachar who understood the times in which they were living. I then showed the participants the correlation between the Social Gospel ovement beginning after the Civil War and how the church must be socially active because of Covid-19. To make this happen we discussed topics such as “The Social Gospel Movement and The Scriptures” and “The Social Gospel Movement and the Character and Nature of Jesus.”

We then transitioned from the historical foundation to the theological foundation. The theological foundation for the project was liberation theology. I began by introducing

to the participates Gustavo Guitierrez who is the founder and father of Liberation Theology. I emphasized that liberation theology is not a liberal or conservative theology but is a biblical theology. I gave them my own definition of liberation theology as faith in action based upon the teaching of James in the Book of James. “But someone will say, ‘You have faith; I have deeds.’ Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds” (Jam. 2:18, NIV). I also taught the class how James Cone by way of Black Liberation Theology made a major contribution to how we implement the principles of liberation theology to bring about change in our communities. The rest of the class time was spent proving that liberation theology is biblically based because of the ethic of love and God’s bias toward those at the bottom of society. We had a question-and-answer period and the students filled out the surveys for week two. I informed the class that we would not meet on July 5, 2025, because of the 4th of July holiday. We ended the session with a brief prayer.

Week Three

We gathered on July 12, 2025, once again at the Zion Traveler Baptist Church for implementation of week three of the project. This week’s objective was to cover the interdisciplinary foundation and introduce the participants to the programs of the Zion Traveler Community Development Corporation. Once again, I taught the interdisciplinary foundation but the introduction to the Zion Traveler Community Development programming was taught by Tiffany White, the director of a local domestic violence non-profit organization named DART and the director of programming for our community development corporation.

After opening the session with a brief word of prayer, I began the lesson by distinguishing for the participants the difference between community, regional, and commercial banks. I emphasized how research suggests that community banks with assets lower than $10 billion dollars are more likely to invest in their communities in a significant way. I also showed the participants the correlation between community banks investing in their respective communities and the local church also investing in their communities. I also emphasized that just as churches are connected to their communities, local or community banks are connected to their communities as well. The paradigm is the same for both the local church and the local bank. If bank does well and invests in the community, then the community does not just survive but it thrives. Such is the case with the church. If the church does well and invests in the community, then the community does well for the glory of God.

We then shifted from the interdisciplinary foundation to the introduction of the programs of the Zion Traveler Community Development Corporation. I introduced Tiffany White to the participants, and she began her lesson. She began highlighting the fact that many of the programs of the Zion Traveler Community are done in partnership with the City of Ruston, Grambling State University, and our local banking partners Origin Bank, Century Next Bank, and Gibsland Bank and Trust. She also emphasized that our program's main objective is the alleviation of poverty. The first program introduced was our ten-week financial education program entitled "Thrive 360: Breaking the Cycle and Building the Dream." The participants were informed that this was a program federally funded by a federal grant. The aims of the initiative were to bring real change and offer a helping hand to adult participants (aged eighteen plus) through a

holistic approach to increase earning potential and improve quality of life. All participants in the program were giving access to 1:1 via our banking partners and education partners to support their unique needs, preparing them for a brighter future. Additionally, she talked about our specific focus on promoting financial literacy among youth participants (aged twelve to seventeen). The identified pillars of success for both the adult and youth programs were budgeting, building credit, savings, avoiding predatory lending practices, and preparing for homeownership.

Next, she discussed the Zion Traveler Community Development program entitled "Thrive 360: Bridging the Gap to Career Confidence," which aims to enhance the workforce through readiness and career development. The identified pillars of this program were creating resumes, conducting successful job searches, preparing for interviews, and providing information on admission and funding for continuing education by way of local trade schools, vocational schools, and universities. She emphasized the community development's partnership with Grambling State University, Louisiana Tech University, and Delta Community College, which are all located in Ruston and Lincoln Parish.

Finally, she spoke concerning the Zion Traveler Community Development program entitled "Thrive 360: A Smart Restart to Health and Wellness." She brought to light that this program is of great interest and importance to the non-profit because of the health desert in our community. It is an imperative because we recognize the critical role of health in overall well-being. The pillars of this program were identified as diabetes education and screenings, dietary management, and promoting overall health and

wellness. She then opened the floor to take questions from the participants. The participants filled out surveys, and we closed with a word of prayer.

Week Four

On Saturday, July 19, 2025, we gathered at the Zion Traveler Baptist Church for the implementation of week four of the project. The aim of this session was to reveal to the participants the importance of banking and partnering with a local bank by way of a non-profit to combat poverty. The speaker for this session was Bobby Williams, the director for Community Development and Senior Vice President at Origin Bank. Williams began by highlighting the pros of community banking. He listed the pros as personalized customer service, loan decision making, support for the local economy, flexibility and innovation, community development, financial education, and community development. Williams who is also the chief financial officer for the Zion Traveler Baptist Community Development Corporation and I then began to discuss with the participants how all these pros create an atmosphere for us to be able to combat poverty in our community. We discussed with the participants community banks are more likely to grant loans to low and moderate-income households. We also presented testimonials from participants of our financial literacy programs who had received home loans via our local banking partners after being denied by regional and commercial (national) banks. Next, we discussed how, because the local bank understands the community's financial needs, they are more willing to fulfill them. We used the community reinvestment money given to the Zion Traveler Community Development Corporation as an example of how local banks circulate money within the same community to bolster the local economy.

The floor was opened for questions, the participants filled out surveys, and we concluded with a word of prayer.

Week Five

On Saturday, July 26, 2025, we gathered at the Zion Traveler Baptist church for the implantation of week five of the project. The speaker for this week was Dr. Marc Newman, Chief Advancement Officer at Hampton University. The title of Dr. Newman's lecture was "Church Growth: From Tithes to Treasure: A Blueprint for Community Economic Empowerment." Dr. Newman talked about the significant financial benefits of church grants against the practical challenges, providing a clear path for churches and nonprofits to navigate the grant writing process successfully. He placed emphasis on both the pros and cons of writing and receiving grants to combat poverty in the community. He focused on the pros that grants provide a financial boost for churches, expand the churches impact, give the church enhanced credibility, and allows the church to have diversified income to do ministry. Next, he identified the cons and challenges, which are that the grant writing application process is time-intensive, there are strict reporting demands, and acquiring a grant is a highly competitive environment but partnerships enhance your opportunity to be successful. Listed below are the eight crucial steps to apply for a grant:

1. Scrutinize the Grant Guidelines
2. Assemble Essential Documents
3. Build Relationships
4. Craft a Compelling Narrative

5. Construct a Through Budget
6. Ensure Application Completeness
7. Following Application Guidelines
8. Prepare for Follow-Ups

The floor was open for questions, the participants filled out surveys, and we concluded with a word prayer.

Week Six

The final week of the "Thrive 360 Bootcamp: Empowering Small to Mid-sized Rural Church to Combat Poverty" was on Saturday, August 2, 2025. The aim of this last session was to bring a lawyer in to give participants the steps to creating their own non-profit organization. The presenter for this week was Attorney Patrick Jefferson. He was chosen because of his experience working with local churches to deal with legal matters and his heart for seeing churches impact communities in a positive way. Attorney Jefferson was very clear and concise in the information given and steps that need to be taken to create a non-profit organization to combat poverty. He discussed and provided a checklist for the participants to guide them on their journey. Listed below is the checklist:

1. Clarify mission and purpose
2. Choose a legal name
3. Appointing a board of directors
4. File Articles of Incorporation
5. Draft Bylaws
6. Hold an organizational meeting

7. Obtain an EIN number
8. Apply for a federal 501(c)(3)
9. Open a bank account
10. Develop policies and procedures
11. Getting to work impacts the community

Finally, the floor was open for questions. The participants then filled out the survey for that session, and they were also given the link to fill out the post survey for the bootcamp. Also, throughout the six-week bootcamp the participants were sent via email journal questions for the purpose of journaling and analyzing the information that they had received throughout the project.

Summary of Learnings

The following data captures the information collected during the six-week bootcamp. The participants completed pre- and post-surveys, surveys at the conclusion of each session, and journal entries throughout the boot camp. The following is a summary of the information collected.

Pre- and Post-Surveys

The purpose of the pre- and post- surveys was to assess the participants' current understanding and capacity to develop a non-profit organization. The surveys were also conducted to measure the participants' growth and knowledge after being provided access to the tools to create non-profit organizations for the purpose of combating poverty. There was a total of fifteen churches that participated in the six-week bootcamp.

Does your church have a nonprofit organization?

The first question asked to the participants was to identify which churches already had existing non-profits organizations. Of the ten participants asked 73% answered no and 27% answered yes. However, at the end of the six-week bootcamp 100% of the participants stated that they would work to strengthen the non-profit already in existence and those who did not have a non-profit planned to start the process.

Do you think churches should have non-profits?

This question was asked to gauge the participants' beliefs about whether a church should have a non-profit organization. According to the data 87% of the participants believed that churches should have non-profit organizations, while 13% were unsure. The post survey revealed that the participants, after what they had learned during the bootcamp 100% strongly believed that churches should have non-profit organizations.

Does your church partner with any local nonprofits?

The participants were asked to reveal whether they had any already existing relationships with other non-profits in their communities. The data revealed that 60% of the participants did not have relationships with local non-profits, while 40% of the participants did have relationships with local non-profits. The post survey concluded that after the training 100% of the participants would significantly increase collaboration with other non-profits.

Does your church bank with a community bank? Does your church bank with a regional or national bank?

The purpose of this question was to see if the churches participating banked with a community, regional, or commercial bank (national bank). According to the survey 80% banked with a community bank, while 20% did not bank with a community bank. The participants also stated via the research that 53% banked with either a regional or national bank, while 47% did not. The post survey revealed that 50% were willing to consider changing the bank they banked with, while 50% would not change their bank but they were more informed.

Does your church have a relationship with local or city government?

This question was asked to see how the churches were already in some form or fashion working with parish (county) or city government. According to the data, 87% of the churches have a relationship with local or city government, while 13% did not have a relationship with local or city government. After the training the data showed that 100% of the participants understood the significance of working with city and local government.

Does your church have legal representation?

Having legal representation is key to creating a non-profit. Therefore, the question was asked to discover whether the churches participating had legal representation to begin the initial steps to create a non-profit. According to the data, 67% of the participants already had legal representation, while 33% did not. The post-survey

revealed that 60% of those who did not have legal representation would now hire legal representation after the bootcamp.

Would you consider your church's financial condition as strong?

According to the data, 47% of the participants considered their church's financial condition to be strong, 40% of the participants did not consider their church's financial condition to be strong, and 13% of the participants were unsure. After the bootcamp, 100% of the participants agreed to implement strategies to significantly improve the church's financial condition.

Would you consider the financial condition of where your church resides as strong?

The purpose of the question was to gauge the financial condition of the community surrounding the churches that participated in the bootcamp. According to the data, 47% did not consider the condition to be strong, 33% considered the condition to be strong, and 20% of the respondents were unsure. The data revealed that after the bootcamp, 100% of the participants believed that they were more equipped to address the economic needs of their communities by having access to the tools to create non-profits.

Do you think churches should apply for state and federal grants?

The purpose of the question was to identify the participants' philosophy concerning churches applying for state and federal grants to fund non-profit organizations. According to data, 87% believed that churches should apply for government funding, 7% believed that churches should not, and 7% were unsure. The

post-survey revealed that even after the bootcamp, 60% of the participants were slightly prepared to apply for federal funding, while 40% were not prepared.

Please explain what you anticipate learning or achieving through this six-week boot camp.

Church One: My expectations include an insight into expanding opportunities and involvement in non-profits, church growth and financial assistance. Church Two: I want to improve financial status, community relationships, and a strong knowledge of church administration. Church Three: I want assistance in grant writing. Church Four: More knowledge concerning non-profits in small rural churches. Church Five: Information about community development and housing. Church Six: Positive information to move the ministry forward in community service. Church Seven: Not sure, however, surely, I should be able to glean information that I can take back to the church that would be beneficial. Church Eight: I anticipate learning how to organize a non-profit and how to manage grants. Church Nine: How to connect with the right people to assist in other streams of income rather than relying on tithes and offerings. Church Ten: I'm looking to learn what strategies an extremely small church with limited resources can employ to become a beacon of light and provide financial assistance to our community. Church Eleven: Knowledge on how non-profit organizations can coincide with the church. Church Twelve: I would like to be informed on different ways to assist the church financially and to grow the church numerically. Church Thirteen: How to get the church more financially stable as pursue mission in the community. Church Fourteen: Attaining

church financial growth. Church Fifteen: Knowledge as it relates to monies our church may apply for renovations and community service.

Weekly Surveys

Another methodology used to collect data during the bootcamp was weekly surveys. At the end of each session the participants were given survey questions to answer concerning the effectiveness and clarity of the information presented.

Week One - How familiar were you with Isaiah 58:12 before this session?

According to the data 50% of the participants were familiar with the biblical foundation scripture for the bootcamp Isaiah 58:12, while 50% of the participant were not familiar with Isaiah 58:12.

How clearly did the teaching explain the meaning of Isaiah 58:12?

The data revealed that 100% of the participants believed that Isaiah 58:12 was explained clearly and effectively.

What does the phrase "Repairer of Broken Walls" mean to you in the context of your church's mission?

Church One: It means rebuilding the families, communities, and systems in our society. Church Two: My church's mission is to rebuild, restore, and raise access to resources that better the community. Church Three: As a young pastor, I firmly believe that the vision of the pastor is the cornerstone upon which the growth and effectiveness of

a church in its mission is to serve the kingdom beyond its walls. Church Four: To identify the needs for our community, then provide help to the people to have hope to believe/dream again and give something tangible other than something spiritual. Church Five: Rebuild our community. Church Six: It symbolizes rebuilding relationships, restoring communities, and bringing healing and wholeness to individuals and society.

After this session, how motivated do you feel to act toward community restoration?

The data revealed that after the session given on Isaiah 58:12, 100% of the participants were motivated to act toward community restoration, just as the Jews did who returned from Babylonian exile.

Do you feel your church currently has a strategy or desire to address poverty in a sustained way?

According to the data, 83% of the participants did feel as if their church had a strategy or desire to address poverty in a sustained way, while 17% believed their church did have a strategy in place to combat poverty.

What resources or training do you think your church needs most right now to begin rebuilding and restoring your community?

The data revealed that the participants truly desired resources and training for the purpose of restoring and rebuilding their communities. According to the data, 26% of the participants needed financial and stewardship training, 26% needed leadership

development, 26% needed community partnership strategies, 17% needed biblical and social justice training, and 4% needed knowledge concerning the importance of meeting needs.

Week Two - How familiar are you with the Social Gospel Movement and its emphasis on applying Christian ethics to social justice issues?

According to the data, 50% of the participants were familiar with social Gospel movement, while 50% were not familiar.

How familiar are you with Liberation Theology's principle of the "preferential option for the poor?"

The research revealed that 50% were familiar with the teaching of the "preferential option for the poor," while 50% were not.

To what extent do you agree: "God calls the church not only to offer charity, but to challenge systematic poverty?"

The data brought to light that only 75% of the respondents believed that God calls the church to challenge systematic poverty, while 25% did not believe that God called the church to challenge systematic poverty.

What activities do you believe are essential for a church-founded non-profit based upon the Social Gospel and Liberation Theology?

According to the data, based upon the teaching of the Social Gospel and Liberation Theology 31% believed that long term skill development is needed, 27% believed that emergency relief is needed, 19% believed advocacy for policy change is needed, 19% believed that community organizing is needed, and 4% believed that prison ministry is needed.

How effective and clear do you believe the presenter was for this session?

The data revealed that 100% of the participants believed that the presentation was clear and effective.

Week Three - What do you see as the biggest barrier to applying what you learned from the overview of the Zion Traveler community Development Corporation Thrive 360 Program?

The research showed that the participants considered the barriers to implementing some of the programing from the Thrive 360 overview as follows: 38% lack of time, 23% internet access, 15% difficulty understanding the material, 15% no follow-up or support, and 8% the need to execute the organization of a non-profit.

What support would most help you continue using the skills learned in the Thrive 360 presentation?

The participants thought that the support that would be most helpful was 62% believed follow up and refresher workshops, 23% thought peer support groups or

accountability partners, 8% thought one-on-one coaching in a pillar area, and 8% thought access to computers and internet at a community center.

How effective and clear do you believe the presenter was during this session?

The data revealed that 100% of the participants believed that the presenter was clear and effective.

Week Four - Which bank-supported activities would most help your non-profit or church?

The participants believed that the bank-supported activities that would be most helpful were as follows: 32% financial literacy workshops led by bank staff, 32% sponsorships and grants, 23% volunteer support from bankers, and 14% access to low interest loans or financial products.

What's the main reason for your non-profit or church partner with a local bank?

The data suggested that the main reason for the participant's non-profit or church partner with a local bank would be as follows: 50% accessing funds and grants, 25% enhancing credibility via association, 13% building financial education programs, and 13% joining community development projects.

After the presentation how well do you understand a bank's goal for community investment under the Community Reinvestment Act?

According to the data, 62% understood the bank's goal for community reinvestment, while 38% did not fully understand.

Week Five - Which element of grant writing do you find most challenging?

According to the data collected the elements the participants found the most challenging as it concerns grant writing are as follows: 38% found writing a compelling and data driven narrative, 38% found crafting a detailed and justified budget, 13% found defining smart objectives and measurable outcomes, and 13% found researching funders and meeting deadlines.

How likely are you to collaborate with a professional grant writer or mentor?

After hearing the lecture on grant writing the data collected revealed that 100% of the participants agreed that it was necessary to collaborate with a grant writer to ensure the grant is written properly. They also believed that the collaboration would increase the chances of the non-profits receiving the grant.

How valuable would a structured partnership where banks provide grant support, technical expertise, and volunteer training be for your non-profit?

According to data, 75% believed that a partnership with banks would be valuable to non-profits, while 25% did not consider a partnership as valuable when it concerned grant writing.

How clearly did the grant writer explain the grant writing process?

The data revealed that the participants understood the grant writing process because the presenter was clear. According to the data 100% of the participants believed that the explanation was clear.

Week Six - How clearly did the lawyer explain the legal steps required to establish a non-profit?

According to the data, 63% of the participants believed that the lawyer clearly explained the legal steps to establish a non-profit, while 37% believed that the presentation was not as clear as it could have been about how to legally establish a non-profit.

How confident are you in the lawyer's knowledge and expertise on non-profit law?

The data confirmed that 50% of the participants were confident in the lawyer's expertise, while 50% were not confident in the lawyer's expertise.

How useful was the content in preparing your church to take the next steps toward incorporation and compliance?

The data stated that 50% of the participants believed that the information given by the lawyer was useful, while 50% believed it was not useful.

How well did the lawyer tailor the legal guidance to the specific context and need of churches?

The participants, according to data, were also divided concerning the lawyer tailoring the information to the church's needs. According to the data, 50% believed it was tailored, while 50% believed that it was not tailored to meet the church's needs.

Journal Entries

Another methodology used during the bootcamp to capture data was journaling. The information below presents a synopsis of the data received from the participant's journal entries.

Journal Entry One - What barriers may keep your church from becoming a "Restorer of Streets with Dwellings" based upon Isaiah 58:12?

Church One: Procrastination is a barrier. Church Two: Not being able to see the community as one being in ruin. Church Three: Lack of manpower is a barrier. Church Four: Lacking the capacity to reimagine ministry now. Church Five: Lack of membership participation.

What would you like to see God rebuild through your church in the next twelve months?

Church One: Partnerships with local churches and community banks that empower small churches to do major ministry. Church Two: Our community and the people of our community. Church Three: The economy in our area. Church Four: Relevance and a desire to minister to our broken community. Church Five: Participation in missionary work.

Journal Entry Two - Which biblical stories or principles inspire your church's commitment to fighting poverty?

Church One: Matthew 25:34-40. Church Two: The Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37. Principle: True neighborly love involves sacrificial compassion, crossing social and ethnic lines to meet urgent needs. Inspiration: This parable has motivated Christians to act on behalf of the poor, not just in charity but in advocacy. Church Three: Malachi 3:10. Church Four: Matthew 15:29. Church Five: Several biblical stories highlight poverty and God's concern for the poor. The parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37 shows compassion for a stranger in need, regardless of their social standing. The story of Ruth and Naomi demonstrates how Boaz, a kinsman-redeemer, provides for Ruth, a poor widow, and ensures her survival. The story of Lazarus and the Rich Man contrast the eternal fates of the wealthy man and a poor beggar. Additionally, various passages in the Bible, like Deuteronomy 15:4, emphasize God's concern for the poor and the need to care for them. Church Six: Jesus telling us that what we have done to the least of men you have done to me. Church Seven: Leviticus 25:8-55; God established a system where debts were forgiven, land was returned, and the poor had a fresh start every fifty years. Others included Acts 2:44-45; Acts 4:32-35 where the early church shared things. Church Eight: The rebuilding of the wall in Jerusalem.

Journal Entry Three - In what ways could your church better emulate community banks' civic investments?

Church One: Offer more workshops and training like these, not just periodically.

Church Two: Churches can learn much from community banks' approach to civic investment. Community banks thrive by reinvesting in the neighborhoods they serve, building trust, and supporting local development principles that can powerfully enhance a church's mission. Church Three: By having ministry that focuses on civic and community investment. Church Four: We could invest church resources to help those in distress and need. Church Five: We must be intentional about empowering and informing the community. Church Six: More outreach. Church Seven: Invest in the community's wellbeing, empower local leadership, offer services beyond Sunday, model stewardship, and accountability. Church Eight: Getting in position to benefit the church as a whole and the community.

Exit Interviews

The fourth methodology used to collect data during the bootcamp was exit interviews. The participants were interviewed at the end of the bootcamp. Each church that participated scheduled a time to meet with me to conduct the interview which consisted of two questions.

After participating in the Thrive 360 Bootcamp: Empowering Small to Mid-sized Rural Churches to Combat Poverty, what would you like to implement at your church to combat poverty?

Church One: We love to organize and launch our CDC. Church Two: Establish a Community Resource Center, launch a small-scale community hub offering job training, financial literacy workshops, and food distribution. Church Three: To begin having

conversations with local banks to establish a partnership. To develop a financial literacy program to work toward changing as many lives as possible at it relates to each individual financial situation. Church Four: We would like to complete our non-profit and obtain grants for mental health services. Church Five: We would like to create an opportunity for the community where our church is located to be informed on financial literacy programs to help build the community up. Church Six: We want to create a feeding ministry, prison ministry, multi-purpose facility, and develop community partnerships. Church Seven: Host a community partnership workshop, fund local scholarships, and community development. Church Eight: Establish a food pantry and minister to senior citizens in the community.

What was most valuable about the bootcamp? What could be improved?

Church One: The presentations were good until the internet and zoom started acting weird. At times we missed information that may have been critical because of technical difficulties. Nevertheless, the bootcamp was very helpful. Church Two: How to go about starting a 501(3)c. Church Three: The attorney gave us his contact number and that was most valuable to me. As for improvement, I think more time should be given for the bootcamp because there was a lot of information to take on. Church Four: The audio could have been better on the zoom. Church Five: The entire presentation was very informative and well executed. Church Six: The grant writing steps were the most valuable. More handouts should have been given. Church Seven: The overall presentation was good, and I think the sound on the zoom could have been a little better.
Church Eight: Six weeks was not enough time to elaborate on all the information given.

Conclusion

Churches because of Covid-19, inflation, and the political climate continue to suffer by way of financial hardship. However, I believe that the "Thrive 360 Bootcamp: Empowering Small to Mid-sized Rural Churches to Combat Poverty" was a success and proved the hypothesis that churches given access to the tools can create non-profit organizations to combat poverty. Throughout the duration of the bootcamp the participants displayed increased confidence as it concerned their ability and capability to launch non-profits to reach the least, left out, and looked over in their communities. The pre- and-post surveys revealed that the participants' knowledge of forming non-profits, grant writing, and community partnerships increased significantly.

The weekly surveys and the participant's class participation showed that the teaching of the theological, historical, and theological foundation caused a seismic shift in the attitudes of the participants as it concerns o meeting the needs of the community. The data showed that the participants desired to be intentional about modeling the biblical foundation scripture of Isaiah 58:12, the principles of the Social Gospel Movement, and Liberation Theology. These teachings appeared to renewed, restored, and revived the passion in the participants for local missions by way of non-profits.

The data also revealed that the participants were excited about the opportunities available through banking partnerships and grant writing to create new streams of income for ministry by way of a non-profit. They left the bootcamp with a clear vision and plan on how to leverage partnerships and collaborate with local government, community banks, colleges and universities, and businesses to fulfill the Great Commission. Birthed

in the participants was also the desire to uplift their communities out of poverty by focusing on workforce development, food insecurity, housing assistance, and mental health.

If I could do this bootcamp again, it would be eight to twelve weeks instead of six weeks. It was a lot of information to cover in the six weeks allotted for the project. In the exit interviews, many of the participants indicated that it was not long enough because they were learning so much, having a good time, but trying to absorb so much information such a short time was difficult. Another thing I would change is for the entire bootcamp to be in person for everyone. It was difficult engaging the participants who were participating via zoom. Also, on a few occasions the participants on zoom expressed that the audio was not the best and the screen would often freeze because of the internet issues that come with being in a rural context. Another challenge during the bootcamp was trying to get the participants to be more thorough when journaling. Too often, the participants only gave one sentence answers to journal questions. Finally, it was difficult trying to get all the participants to fill out the surveys at all or in a timely manner.

Overall, the "Thrive 360 Bootcamp: Empowering Small to Mid-Sized Rural Churches to Combat Poverty" was a good experience and for the glory of God. I believe the participants by way of the biblical, historical, theological, interdisciplinary foundations, non-profit presentation, banking presentation, grant writing presentation, and legal presentation left with a wealth of knowledge. The participants left with knowledge of why a church should have a non-profit to combat poverty. The participants departed enlightened on how non-profits are to function biblically, theologically, missionally, financially, and legally. They were equipped with the key steps to form their

own non-profits and to make sure that they are intentional about investing in the community where they reside. They left ready through their non-profit work to shine for Jesus. “In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven” (Mt. 5:16).

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